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JUNE 2006

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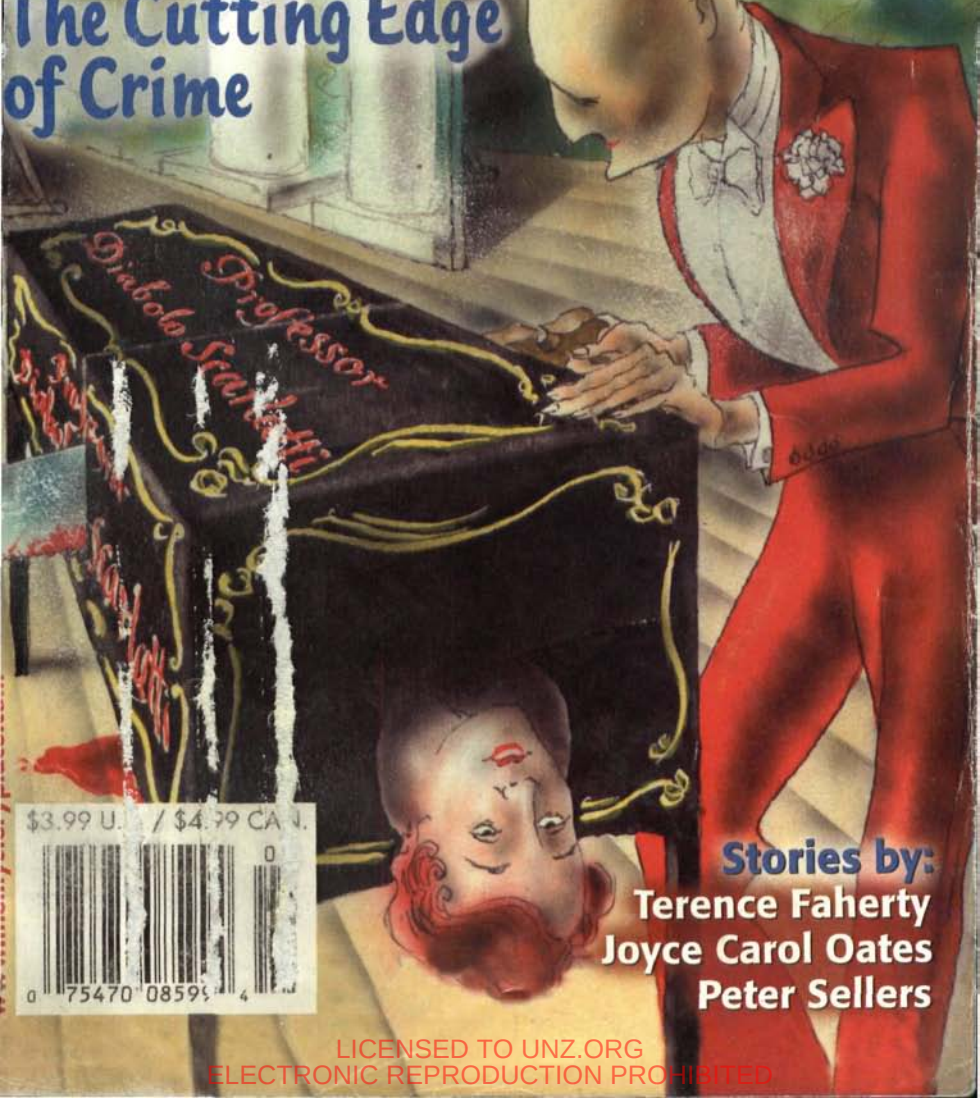

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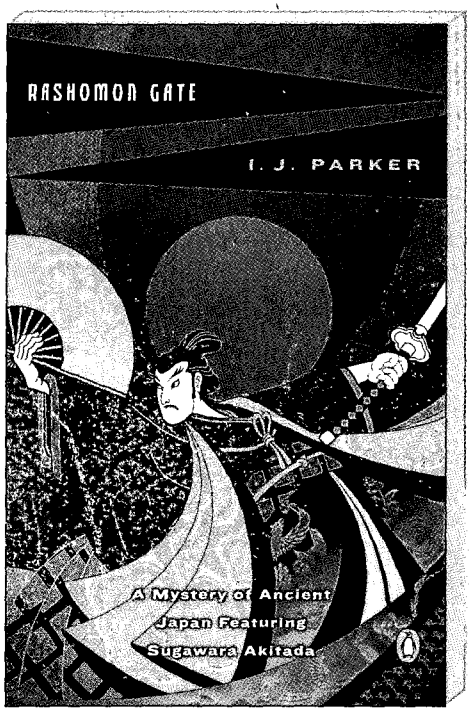

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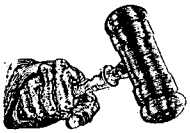

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BABYSITTER

by Joyce Carol Oates

Joyce Carol Oates's latest book is one readers of dark suspense won't want to miss. *The Female of the Species* (Harcourt, 1/06) includes some *EQMM* stories, but most of the tales are from other sources. Ms. Oates has been writing suspense novels as Rosamond Smith and, more recently, as Laura Kelly, for years, but as far as we know, this is her first mystery story collection.

Midday, early spring, sunshine in steel bars flashing on the river, she drove to meet him where he'd summoned her. Wind swept in roiling gusts from the Canadian shore.

Suburban life: appointments! Mornings, afternoons. And then the children's appointments. Dentist, orthodontist. Gynecologist, hair salon, yoga. Architect, community relations forum, library fundraiser for which she's a committee co-chair, flattered to be invited, yet uneasy. Suburban life: Each calendar day is a securely barred window, you shove up the window and grasp the bars, grip the bars tight, these are bars that confine but also protect, what pleasure in shaking them!

My appointments this afternoon, she'd told them. Two o'clock, then three, after the library I must drive downtown.

It was a journey: downtown. Twelve miles south and east on the thunderous expressway.

She drove without haste. She drove like a woman already fatally stricken, resigned. She drove at a wavering speed, in the right lane. Calm as a woman in a dream the outcome of which she already knows though in fact she did not know. *What will happen? I will never go through with this—will I?*

She didn't think so. It would be her first time, she hadn't such courage.

Out of the leafy suburbs north of the Midwestern city she drove. Massive vehicles passed on the left, her station wagon shuddered in their wake. The nape of her neck was bare, her pale hair swung in scissor-cut wings about her face. Suburban villages were passing beyond the six-foot chain-link fence above the expressway, barely visible from the highway that seemed to be sucking her into it, by degrees downhill in the direction of the river, what was called, as if it were a self-contained place, City Center.

The air was clamorous, like an argument among strangers you

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can't quite hear. It was a gusty April, not yet Easter. There was something she meant to remember: Easter. Something about the children. Her skin burned in anticipation of him.

He was her friend, she wished to think. He'd touched her only once. The imprint of his fingers on her forearm was still visible to her, in secret.

The station wagon was a new model, handsome and gleaming and paneled in wood. A sturdy vehicle, in the rear strewn with children's things. Still, gusts of wind rocked it, she gripped the steering wheel tight. Such wind! In their hillside house in Bloomfield Heights that was an old fieldstone colonial, wind whistled in the chimneys, rattled the windows with a furtive sound like something trying to get in. Doors were blown open by the wind, or blown shut with a crash. Oh, Mommy! their five-year-old daughter cried. The ghost!

My appointment downtown, she'd told Ismelda, who had her cell phone number in any case. *Should anything happen. Should you need me. You can pick up the children at the usual door, at their school. I will be back by five-thirty, I'm sure.*

Five-thirty! This was a statement, a pledge. She wondered should she tell him, as soon as she stepped inside the door.

I can't stay long. I will have to leave by . . .

It was astonishing to her, how the city began to emerge out of a muddle of wood-frame houses, aged tenements, flat-topped roofs, and debris-strewn pavement. Suddenly in the distance, two or three miles ahead, were a number of high-rise buildings, some of them quite impressive. City Center was ahead, a narrow peninsula at the tip of downtown, on the restored riverfront: Renaissance Plaza. She would exit there.

The city had once been a great Midwestern city, before a catastrophic "race riot" in 1967. Since then, the white population had gradually declined, like air escaping from a balloon.

I won't have the courage, I'm not a reckless woman. I will only just talk to him. I will tell him . . .

The next exit was City Center. Last Exit Before Tunnel to Canada. Her heart quickened like the heart of a creature sensing danger though not knowing from which direction danger will spring.

. . . I want you as a friend. Someone in whom I can . . .

She'd driven the children to school that morning, as she did most mornings. Mommy in a bulky car coat. She had been married for nine years. That morning the children had been unusually fretful, tugging at her. Mommy! Mom-*my!* That sound of reproach in a child's voice, your heart is lacerated. It was a summons to her blood, she could not resist. The children adored her, they were insatiable. Perhaps they sensed something. The little girl was in kindergarten, the little boy in second grade. Mommy, kiss-kiss! She laughed, she was wounded by their beauty that seemed to her fragile like something tiny that has fallen from its nest, or some-

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thing that has been expelled from its shell, its protective armor.

She shuddered with the knowledge, Mommy was their protective armor. She was not wearing the bulky car coat now but a coat of soft black cashmere with a blank mink collar, that fell in loose folds about her slender legs.

In the rearview mirror above the windshield her face gleamed pale as a moon. Fine lines at the corners of her eyes not visible in the glass. She smiled, uneasy. For a long time she'd been one of the young wives, one of the younger mothers, now no longer. She thought *I am a beautiful woman, I have a right to be loved.*

Lying beside her heavily sleeping husband, nights in succession for nine years. She could not remember their first time together, it seemed as if they had always known each other, as children perhaps. Her husband was a man who shook hands forcefully, looked you in the eye. A man you could trust. A man you wanted to know. She had seen him look appraisingly at women, she'd seen the way women looked at him. He was careless, there was something imperial about him, he was a six-foot boy, confident of being admired. He was a man who could not love her quite so much as she loved him, he'd admitted this. Even in wounding her, saying such a thing, he seemed to be granting a blessing, tossing gold coins at her.

In all marriages there is the imbalance: one who loves more than the other. One who licks wounds in secret, the rust-taste of blood.

Now she was no longer on the expressway, she was uncertain where to turn. The streets of the city center were narrow, one-way, congested with delivery trucks. A dying city, why was there so much traffic? She could see the gleaming tower of the hotel that was her destination. She could not possibly get lost in a maze of streets so close to the hotel! She regretted she hadn't left home earlier. Her pride in not having left home earlier. She had stared at the clock mesmerized, she had held herself back. Then calmly telling Ismelda: I have an appointment, downtown. I will be back by . . . Her eyes shone like the eyes of one unaccustomed to emotion, taking care not to stammer.

In this season of their marriage, her husband often returned home late. He was an enormously busy man, he had both an assistant and a secretary. He had business luncheons, dinners. He was in New York City, in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles. Yet he was one of the younger men in his firm, his elders looked upon him with admiration and approval. The children loved Daddy emptying his pockets for them, pennies and nickels, dimes. She was fearful of lying to this man, he might hear the quaver in her voice with indifference.

She had turned the station wagon into a parking garage. She was beginning to be anxious. She would be late meeting him, she had no idea if he would wait for her. He was not a man accustomed to waiting for women, she supposed. He was not a resident of this city, he came here on business. Though perhaps it wasn't

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business as her husband might identify it. He appeared to have money, he appeared to be unmarried, not a father. She tried to recall his eyes, if they were brown, if they were dark, she could recall only the impact of his eyes, the heavy lids, the carved-looking face, a singular face, one she'd felt she had recognized, that left her weak to contemplate. She could not have said his middle name; did not know exactly how to spell his surname. (Perhaps—she had to concede this!—she didn't know his actual name.) What he'd said to her, she could not recall except it had made her laugh initially, with a kind of visceral shock, and then it had made her weak. He'd told her he stayed at the new hotel by the river, where there was a heliport. The governor of the state was flown to the city, often. They'd been cadets together—out in Colorado.

It was a torment to her, in her agitated state: navigating the damned station wagon, looking for a parking space, turning the clumsy vehicle around tight turns, ascending to the next parking level, and to the next. Was this a joke, a comedy! Was her life a farce, others might observe with scorn! Yet she managed to find a place to park, always you manage somehow. She locked the station wagon, a chill wind blowing at her face, her legs. Tugging at her black cashmere coat, like teasing fingers. Then in the slow clanking elevator descending to street level, ugly graffiti at which she could not look. She was thinking *This is a mistake of course.* In the hilly suburban village in which she lived there was no graffiti.

If you don't mind a married woman, she'd joked with him. Her voice had been bold, wistful. He'd only laughed.

It was a windy walk to the Renaissance Plaza by the river. A fierce white sun, though half the sky was massed storm clouds. So close to the great Midwestern lake north of the city, the sky was likely to be unpredictable, one hour to the next. There was sun, later there might be sleet, then a warm rain. The Plaza was elevated above the street, there were numerous steps, revolving doors. There was a symphony hall, there were restaurants, high-rise apartment buildings, a luxury hotel. Limousines, airport shuttle buses moving slowly forward. At once she began to feel more at home, doormen recognized women like her, bellboys, security guards. If she was not a guest at the hotel, she resembled its guests. Good day, ma'am! the uniformed men called to her. They were dusky-skinned like Ismelda, their smiles flashed white. She was a beautiful woman, at a distance you saw this. A beautifully sculpted black coat, black fur collar. Her shoes were expensive, her leather gloves. She wore dark glasses she'd fumbled to slip onto her face. She carried a leather handbag, finely stitched. The uniformed doorman smiled at her as she passed into the revolving door, in the corner of her eye she saw his smile begin to fade immediately, she felt his scorn for her, she had to be mistaken.

She could be a guest here certainly! More likely, she was meeting

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friends for a late lunch. A business lunch, she was a woman who belonged to numerous committees. Her father served on corporate boards, he was a trustee of his former university, both her parents were civic-minded, responsible. Only this once she would be unfaithful to her husband, and to her children, it would never happen again.

He, the man, was to be in room 2133. She did not think of him as an individual with a name, she did not think his name to herself, only just *he, him.* Without apparent haste or agitation she crossed to the bank of elevators, sleek glass cubicles that lifted and fell soundlessly through the immense open space of the hotel's atrium. At midday the hotel lobby was crowded, festive. There was a convention of hair stylists, another of radiologists. There was recorded harp music. There were terraces of Easter lilies, tulips. Potted ferns the size of small trees. A noisily trickling fountain. Like a woman in a spell she stepped into the glass elevator, she was sucked up into the interior of the hotel as if into a vacuum. Still she was thinking *I can turn back at any time.*

How distant her other life seemed to her, where she was Mommy.

That morning the children had behaved strangely, as if sensing her mood. She'd laid her hand against their foreheads that seemed slightly overwarm, damp. The little girl had been fretful, uncooperative while being dressed. The little boy had complained of bad dreams. She would keep them home, she thought. For April, it was such a raw wet windy day. She and Ismelda and the children would make Easter eggs as they'd done the year before. Yet somehow she'd hurried them through breakfast, she'd drive them to school as usual. If they came down with colds, if they had fevers that evening, it would be her fault.

Ismelda had been born in Manila, she belonged to an evangelical sect called the Church of the Risen Christ. In her small room on the third floor of the stone house Ismelda played Christian rock music.

He was to be in room 2133. He'd left a message for her just that morning. Breathless she hurried along the corridor. Underfoot was a thick-piled carpet, rosy as the interior of a lung. The far end of the corridor seemed to dissolve in haze. Closed doors, no movement or sound. On the doorknob of room 2133 was DO NOT DISTURB. Hesitantly she knocked on the door. He would not open it, there was no one inside. She was faint with yearning, dread.

The door opened inward, he was there.

He laughed at her; the expression on her face. He spoke words she couldn't hear. His arms pulled her inside, the door was shut behind her. He wore trousers, a white undershirt. Hair lay in damp dark tendrils on his forehead, like seaweed. The ridge of bone above his eyes was prominent. He was heavier than she recalled, she was trying to speak his name.

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. . . my happiness is my children, my husband. My marriage. My family. My happiness is not myself but . . .

It was midafternoon, the tall windows were open to the sky. A spangle of sunshine like gold coins against the ceiling. He returned from the bathroom, his face was shadowed. He knelt above her. He straddled her. Their skins slapped wetly together. He laughed into her face, his teeth were bared. She began to plead no, I don't think . . . He was gripping her throat that was so beautiful. His thumbs caressed the arteries beneath her jaw. Beneath her makeup, her skin was wearing through. She began to move in protest, she was a beautiful scaly snake. She was firm-fleshed as a snake, lithe and pained. She was having difficulty breathing. Her eyes were open and stark showing a rim of white above the iris. Her wrist watch and rings had been removed, as before surgery. Her bracelet. On the table beside the bed. She was lost, she had no idea where she was. Her cries were torn from her, like blows. He was not squeezing her throat, only just caressing, forcibly, rhythmically. He was deep inside her, even as his large hands held her throat, he moved deeper, her body had no defense against him. He was unhurried, methodical. He had been a fighter pilot in an earlier lifetime. As a young man he had dropped bombs onto the earth, onto cities. At a distance he had killed. He had not told her this exactly but she knew. He had not done these things by himself, others had performed with him, he was one of many though he'd been alone in the cockpit of his plane as he was alone now inside his skin. His thumbs released their pressure on her arteries, the relief was immediate and enormous. Breath rushed into her lungs, she could have wept with gratitude. The wish to live flooded into her, she adored this man who gave her back her life. In a flat bemused voice he was saying, You like this. You like this. You like this.

Far above her he regarded her. Her hands tried to reach him but could not. Her fingers were weak, her wrists broken. Still he was inside her, she was impaled upon him as upon a hook that pierced her lower body. Now his hands moved onto her torso, her breasts, as if he were a blind man, curious to see her in this way, in the way of touching, sculpting with his fingers. He ran his hands over her, he gripped her breasts as if to test the resiliency of her flesh. Her breasts ached with sensation, the nipples felt raw, as if she'd been nursing, hungry mouths had been feeding from her, tearing at her. She was writhing, darkness opening at the back of her skull. She understood then why she had no name for him, why he had not once spoken her name. When she'd begun to speak his name, at the start of their lovemaking, he'd covered her mouth with the heel of his hand, lightly yet in warning: No.

Beyond the tall windows whose drapes had been pulled back the sky was shot with a vivid chemical light. Below was the river,

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invisible from where they lay, so chopped by wind you could not have said in which direction it flowed. Her eyeballs shifted upward, a death had come over her brain. She saw only a portion of her lover's face, the glisten of oily sweat on his forehead. Only a portion of the ceiling where shimmering water reflected, live-seeming as microorganisms. How ragged her breath was, short and frayed like cloth that has been ripped! As if she'd been drowning, the man had saved her. No one had brought her to such a place before. He had brought her there as if by chance, negligently. The knowledge was crushing to her.

She heard moans, whimpers. She heard a woman's choked sobs. He laughed at her, there was little tenderness in him.

Still he observed her, curiously. As a pilot might observe the ground far below, at a distance at which everything is in miniature, inconsequential. At such a distance there are no individuals. No cries can be heard. She could not bear it, this distance. She reached for him, he gripped her wrists and brought her arms down, spread outright beside her head, so she was helpless. He moved into her, she began to shout, guttural cries that scraped like gravel against her throat. She was a sinewy snake, every inch of her flesh quivering, her skin a damp scaly glisten. He'd pulled a pillow free of the tangle of bedclothes, it must have been caprice, he must have miscalculated, he lowered the pillow over her sweaty face, her anguished eyes and opened mouth, he was pumping hard between her spread thighs as if there was a fascination in him, what he might do to her, the woman, what was emerging between them in this place. Desperately she pulled at his hands, his wrists that were too thick for her fingers to close about, there were hairs on the backs of his hands, wiry hairs on his wrists, she was blinded by the pillow, she was frantic to breathe. Now her body, in which her soul was mute, dazed, swollen tight against her skin like a balloon blown nearly to bursting, began to struggle for its life. The man held her fixed, she was impaled upon him, a great sinewy snake helpless beneath him, the heavy pillow seemed to enclose her head, she was being suffocated. Tendons stood out in her neck, her arteries swelled. She lost consciousness, in a moment she was gone.

Like companions they lay side by side. Like companions who are strangers, thrown together in the same wreck. For a long time she could not move. Her eyelids fluttered weakly, she could not see. Sensation had obliterated her, in the aftermath of sensation there was nothing. Her heartbeat, that had madly accelerated, was slowed now, almost imperceptible. A match had flared into flame, the flame had touched her, exploded inside her, now the flame was extinguished, her body was numbed, she could barely lift her head. The soles of her bare feet seemed to burn as if she'd been

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walking on hot sand. She spoke to the man, she was helpless not to speak, hearing with a kind of pitying astonishment the hopeless words in a voice barely audible *I love you.* It was something of a plea, an argument, yet there was no one with whom to argue, the man seemed not to hear as if sparing her.

She lay as if beneath the surface of shallow water. Sun played upon the water, that was warm, unthreatening. She could not drown in this water, it would protect her. She was drifting into a stuporous sleep. Mommy? Mom-*my?* the little girl was looking for her, though Mommy stood before her, squatted before her, the little girl stared through her, the little boy, the boy whose name she'd forgotten for the moment, he was looking for her, anxious, Mommy where are you?—she'd become a wraith, they could not see her. Someone touched her as if accidentally, in his abrupt way the man was rising from the bed, walking away. He was barefoot, he moved with a negligent ease, no more self-conscious than if he were alone in the hotel room. Weakly she spoke to him, he did not seem to hear. She heard faucets, a toilet flushing. At last she forced herself to move. Her limbs that were paralyzed, broken. Something warmly sticky as blood between her thighs, on her belly.

He went away from her, he wanted her gone. While she was in the bathroom running water, the hottest water she could bear, staring at her dilated eyes in the steamy mirror, she heard him on a telephone. His easy laugh, the murmur of his voice. A man among men he seemed to her, unknowable.

She left him. He wanted her gone, she understood and so she left him. Hey: He gripped her chin, kissed her mouth as you might kiss the forehead of a plain child. At the elevator she turned back, the door to 2133 had shut. In the rapidly descending glass cubicle she wiped at her eyes, angry fists in her eyes. She had restored the damage to her mascara, her eye makeup, now it was damaged again, a teary ruin. Her body wept for him, a seepage between her legs. She thought, I am soiled, fouled. I am a woman who deserves harm.

She left the hotel quickly, the revolving door seemed to sweep her out. She imagined faint muffled laughter in her wake but heard only a doorman invisible to her calling after her in a voice of scornful familiarity "Good evening, ma'am!"

Evening! She wouldn't be home until nearly seven o'clock.

On the expressway, wind buffeted the station wagon. Other vehicles veered in their lanes. She was too distracted to be frightened. Fumbling to call Ismelda on her cell phone but the battery had run low. She was thinking, If the children have been hurt! It was not a rational thought yet she was thinking if The Babysitter had taken them, this was punishment she deserved.

The Babysitter was an abductor and killer of children in the suburbs north of the city, he'd never been identified, arrested. He

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had taken nine children in all but he had not taken a child in several years, it was believed that he'd moved away, or was in prison, or had died. He was called The Babysitter for his methodical way of bathing the bodies of his small victims after raping and strangling them, positioning them in secluded places like parks, a golf course, a churchyard, he'd taken time to launder and even iron their clothing which he folded neatly and left beside them. Always their arms were crossed over their narrow pale chests, their eyes were shut, in such peaceful positions they resembled mannequins and not children who had died terrible deaths, it was said you could not see the ligature marks on their throats until you knelt beside them. The Babysitter had not abducted a child from the suburb in which she lived for at least a decade and yet she was thinking almost calmly *If he has taken them, I will have to accept it.*

The house was made of fieldstone, mortar, brick that had been painted a thin weathered white. Most of the house had been built in the mid nineteenth century, on a large tract of land which was now reduced to three acres, the minimum for property owners in the township. She was relieved to see the warmly lit windows through the trees, of course nothing had happened, they were waiting for her to return and that was all. Her husband had a dinner engagement, he wouldn't be back until the children were in bed. Yet relief flooded her, seeing her husband's car wasn't in the garage. She'd had her revenge, then! She would love her husband less desperately now, she knew herself equal to him.

Rich cooking aromas in the kitchen, the sound of a TV, children's uplifted voices, and Ismelda calling: Ma'am?—but quickly she slipped away upstairs, before the children could rush at her. She showered as she hadn't in the hotel. She soaped every part of her body, she was giddy with relief. She had a lover! He hadn't given her his number, vaguely he'd promised to call her the following week. No one knew, no one had come to harm, the family was safe. Bruises and red welts had already begun to show on her body as if a coarser skin were pushing through, her husband would never notice.

She hurried downstairs, she was kneeling with the children. Hugging the little girl, the little boy. Mommy? Mom-*my?* In two arms she hugged them, what did they have to show her? Easter eggs? So many? Yes, they were beautiful but hadn't Ismelda understood that Mommy wanted her to wait, they would make the eggs together? She spoke sharply to Ismelda at the stove, Ismelda didn't seem to hear, it was a maddening trait of hers, seeming not to hear so her employers had to raise their voices, invariably you sounded like a bully, a fool, raising your voice to a Filipino woman scarcely five feet tall, staring at you with hurt eyes. And the children were clamoring at her, suddenly she wished them gone, all of them gone, banished from her so that she could think of her lover. *I am a murderer* she thought. *I am the one.* Her children crowded her, adoring.

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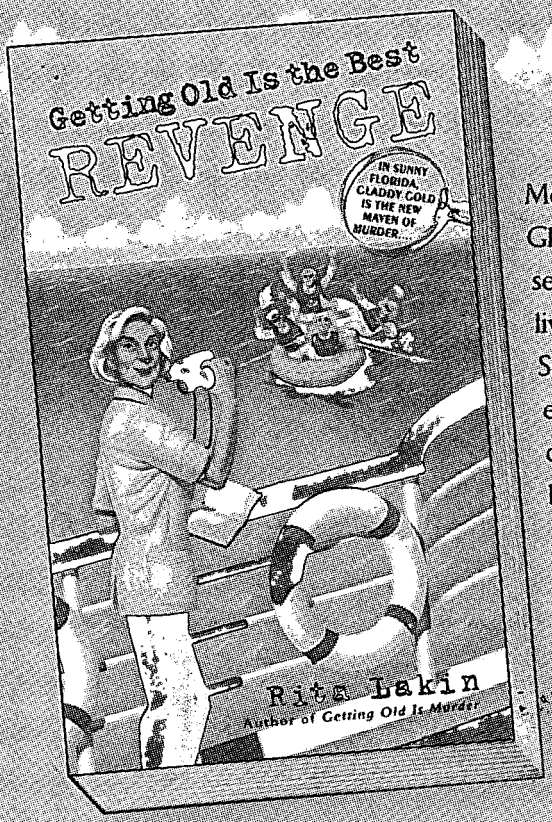
"Gladdy Gold is a treasure—
Miss Marple in Yiddish.
SALTY. SASSY. SUNNY!"

—Carolyn Hart, author of *Murder Walks the Plank*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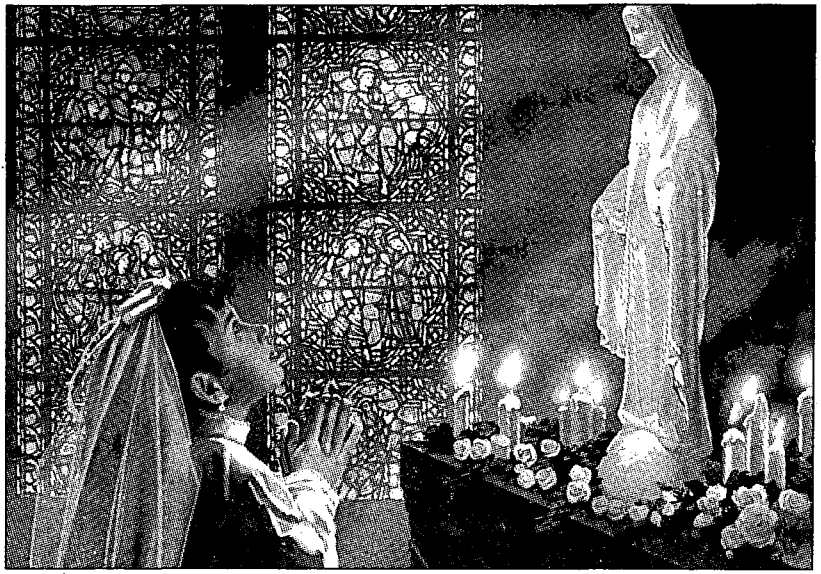

Art by Mark Evans

The Vigil

by Terence Faherty

That my editor's parents loved Christmas was reflected in the name they gave their only child: Emanuel Noel. Their son's feelings for the holiday might be deduced from his having used only his first two initials and his last name all his adult life: E.N. Boxleiter.

Those of us who worked for him at an Indianapolis daily called the *Star Republic* didn't have to guess about Boxleiter's opinion of Christmas. We were used to his temper growing shorter as December's days did, used to him delegating anything to do with the holiday, used to his annual attempts to tone down and dry out the office Christmas parties, attempts that were frustrated by the family that owned the paper.

So I was a little surprised when Boxleiter called me into his office early one Christmas Eve and told me he had a special Christmas assignment for me.

"It's that little girl who's praying for the miracle roof. You know the one."

I did. The little girl's name was Tina Vasquez. She was a third-grader at St. Mary's Catholic School, which belonged to an old

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parish of the same name located on the east side of downtown Indianapolis. Tina was the darling of the media for the second year in a row. Video of her kneeling before a statue of the Blessed Virgin in old St. Mary's was running on local television stations almost every night. Sometimes she was alone, sometimes she was flanked by classmates, all of the girls dressed as they had for their First Communion ceremony, in white dresses and white veils.

Last year Terence Faherty's story "The Widow of Slane" (*EQMM* 3/4-04) was nominated for the Edgar and Anthony awards and won the Macavity Award. The story, featuring P.I. Owen Keane, belongs to one of three series the author maintains. His latest book, *In a Teapot,* is set in the 1940s Hollywood of series character Scott Elliott, and here's the latest in his *Star Republic* series. . . .

They were praying for a Christmas present, and a large one: a new roof for the old church, a miracle roof, as Boxleiter had called it. It would have been an impossible long shot, except that, exactly one Christmas earlier, Tina had prayed up an entire automobile single-handed.

Or maybe not single-handed, since the *Star Republic* had played a small part. The pastor of St. Mary's had called in the story. The priest had explained that Tina was the only child of a single mother and that the two of them were just getting by on welfare. The mother had a chance for a good job, but she needed a car. So Tina had begun a marathon prayer session before a statue of Mary, praying for a Christmas miracle.

And she'd gotten one. We'd run Tina's picture and story two days before Christmas. On Christmas morning, the Vasquez family had awakened to find a late-model Saturn parked outside their double, its title and keys in their mailbox. The local television stations had made it one of the most videotaped cars in Indiana. The *Star Republic,* the paper that had launched the story, hadn't published so much as a black-and-white photo.

"I was afraid last year that we'd created a monster," Boxleiter was saying. "That's why I killed the follow-up story, not that it did any good. Here the kid is, back again, praying away. St. Mary's has already received thousands of dollars in contributions. At the rate the money's coming in, they'll be able to shingle that roof in five-dollar bills."

I asked what was wrong with that.

"Nothing, if it's all legitimate. If it's a scam, it's our fault for getting it started. I want you to check it out."

There didn't seem to me to be much to check out. The money was going directly to the parish, so the Vasquez family couldn't be profiting.

When I pointed that out to Boxleiter, he snapped, "Even if this

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year's money is going to a church, next year's money might not. Some soppy idiot gives a car away, and who knows where it will lead?"

To get an additional rise out of him and to pay him back a little for sending me out into the cold on the day of the office Christmas parties, I asked if he was sure the Saturn hadn't come from the Blessed Virgin.

He waved me out of his office. "Prove it did," he said, "and you can have my Christmas bonus."

The drive to St. Mary's was so short my car heater never had a chance to heat. The church was one of downtown Indy's most beautiful, a happy marriage of French Gothic architecture and Indiana limestone. As I parked in its shadow, I was struck for the hundredth time by the irony that the poorest parishes always had the oldest churches, the ones with the highest maintenance tabs. Luckily for St. Mary's, it also had Tina Vasquez.

She was hard at it, a little girl in a white dress, her long brown hair partially hidden by a gauzy white veil. She was flanked by a girl and a boy, the boy in a white shirt and dark blue dress pants, surely the school uniform. Several other children sat in nearby pews with their parents, awaiting their shifts.

Tina knelt with a perfectly straight back, her tiny hands together but not interlocked. The day was overcast, and the church underlit. As a result, most of the light on Tina's face came from banks of flickering candles before the statue of the Virgin. The candlelight emphasized the girl's dominant feature, her very large, very dark eyes. Those eyes were fixed on the statue before her, which had Mary, in her traditional blue and white, standing on a blue globe that was covered in golden stars.

I'd walked all the way up the center aisle of the church, almost to the altar, so I could view the little girl's face as unobtrusively as possible. That wasn't unobtrusive enough for the priest, who intercepted me and asked me my business. When I showed him my press card, he ushered me into the sacristy, a little room off the altar, apologizing as we went.

"I'm sorry if I was rude, but we've been getting a lot of gawkers, thanks to the television coverage. This morning, a woman actually tried to get Tina's autograph."

I thought of pointing out that the parish was also getting a new roof thanks to the television coverage. Instead I asked how close they were to their goal.

"We're almost there," the priest, whose name was Marcelli, said. He was a young man with large, out-of-focus eyes and a tendency to draw certain words out as though he were chanting them. "It's quite remarkable. We're expecting an extra-large crowd for tonight's midnight Mass, because Tina will be ending her vigil then. The collection should put us over the top."

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I asked him how long he had known the Vasquez family.

"I baptized Tina. It was just after I was assigned here to St. Mary's. Tina's mother, Marguerite, is a sweet woman, but she's had more than her share of problems. It's the old story, I'm afraid. She fell in love with a guy who promised her the world and only came through with a baby. After he'd gotten her pregnant, the guy, Tony Donica, hung around for a while. He and Marguerite lived together and there was talk of them getting married. Then Donica found another young woman who believed his line. They ran off together to Las Vegas. Something happened out there, an accident or something; I'm not sure of the details. And I know you didn't come here to listen to old gossip."

His unfocused eyes grew slightly sharper. "Exactly why have you come? I have to say that I've been a little disappointed with the *Star Republic*. I was the one who called the story in to you last year. You ran a nice little article about Tina before Christmas, but nothing after the car arrived. And nothing so far this year. I was sure you'd forsaken us."

I paraphrased Boxleiter's concerns about the potential for abuse in the phenomenon the *Star Republic* had gotten started.

"You needn't be worried," the priest assured me. "This is the last year for the vigil. Tina and her mother both told me that. Tina only did it this year as a thank-you for the car. The Blessed Virgin came through for Tina last year, so Tina wanted to do something in return. A new roof for Our Lady's church is a pretty big something, but that's the kind of special kid she is."

I asked Marcelli if he really believed the car had come from the Virgin.

He laughed. "Not directly. I know it was some kind soul who read your paper's article and felt a welling up of Christmas spirit. But who's to say what caused that spirit to well up? Tina believes it was the intercession of Mary, and so do I."

He suddenly took me by the arm. "Listen. The thing for you to do is to meet Marguerite. That will put your mind at rest. She's just down the hall in the room the Altar Rosary Society uses. Her mother-in-law, Tina's grandmother, is there, too. I know there was no marriage so there can't really be a mother-in-law, but Marguerite calls Mrs. Donica that, so I do, too."

He led me down a hallway whose wooden floor not only creaked but also cracked and popped. The women in the Altar Rosary room couldn't help but be aware of our approach. There were two of them, seated at a card table that held coffee cups and a plate of Christmas cookies. The younger one, Marguerite, was a future portrait of Tina. She had the girl's dark eyes and slightly upturned nose, though the effect of the eyes was diminished by a much fuller face. The older woman's face was very spare, and her eyes were narrowed by a sceptical, put-upon expression. I hated to

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think of Tina ever looking at the world in that sharp, cynical way.

After he'd introduced us, Father Marcelli excused himself and left. The awkwardness that followed wasn't lifted by the grandmother's opening remark.

"So, your newspaper is finally interested in Tina again now that it's sure she'll make it. You didn't have the faith to come a week ago even."

I pointed out that we'd had faith enough to run the original story about Tina, and that led us into a discussion of the prior Christmas's miracle, the car. Marguerite gave me the whole story again, speaking without a trace of the older woman's accent. Her voice did get husky, though, when she mentioned Tina's father. Oddly, Donica's own mother was much less sentimental.

"That one," she all but sneered. "He'd be alive today if he'd married you like he should have and stayed with you like he should have. He had a good job at the Methodist Hospital. He could have supported you and Tina. But no. He runs away to Las Vegas with some fat blonde, drives drunk, and gets them both killed."

Mrs. Donica made the sign of the cross when she mentioned her son's fatal accident. She'd performed the same ritual earlier in her tirade, when she'd used the words "he'd be alive today."

Marguerite calmly ignored the older woman. "The car turned everything around for us. You should have seen it shining in the sun on Christmas morning. So pretty. When I found the title and the keys in my mailbox, I couldn't believe it. I cried and cried. Thanks to my little Saturn, I have a good job. Tina and I have our own place and our own life."

She went on to describe the color of the car—red—and its reliability and mileage—both miraculous. I was happy to dwell on the subject of the Saturn. As Father Marcelli had predicted, meeting Marguerite Vasquez had settled any doubts I'd inherited from my editor regarding the propriety of little Tina's fundraising. But there remained the challenge Boxleiter had tossed me as I'd left his office: proving the car had come from the Blessed Mother.

I asked Marguerite if she remembered the name of the previous owner of the Saturn, which would have appeared above hers on the title document she'd found in her mailbox.

Mrs. Donica thrust herself across the table, her arm extended, her palm flat. "Don't tell him," she said. "Don't say another word. He wants to tell people it wasn't a miracle, that it wasn't the Virgin Mary."

I told Marguerite what the priest had told me, that identifying the human donor wouldn't prove that Mary wasn't behind the miracle. The donor might even confirm that she was. But it was a waste of my time. Her mother-in-law's outstretched arm and upturned palm had sealed her lips. I would never hear another word from Marguerite Vasquez.

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I thanked them for the interview and started to leave. Then I decided to test a little theory I'd come up with. I turned and said that it was a shame Tony Donica hadn't lived to see the good his daughter was doing.

Marguerite only nodded sadly, but Mrs. Donica made the sign of the cross for the third time.

Once outside in the cold, I started my Chevy and we sat there shaking together. While the engine warmed, I placed a call to the *Star Republic,* to the cubicle of Eric Neuman, once an unpromising copyboy and now the paper's specialist in computer research, legitimate and not-so.

"Where are you?" he asked before I could say more than my name. "The Christmas parties are starting up. The one in Home Delivery is going full-bore. They'll be dancing on their desktops by two."

I told him I was on a special assignment for Boxleiter and that I needed to find a man named Tony Donica. The theory I'd carried away from the Altar Rosary room was that Donica was still alive. That was my interpretation of Mrs. Donica's habit of blessing herself every time someone mentioned her son's death. She didn't seem the type to be praying for the repose of that black sheep's soul. So I'd started to wonder if her signs of the cross might be little acts of contrition for an ongoing lie.

"Have you got anything besides a name?" Neuman asked. "It's a big country, and somebody spiked my eggnog."

I related the little I knew of Donica: He'd supposedly been in an automobile accident in Las Vegas and he'd once worked at Methodist Hospital.

"Bingo," Neuman said. "I've got a buddy over at Methodist. He can get me Donica's Social Security number. With that, it'll be easy. Give me twenty minutes."

I bought lunch at a drive-through White Castle on South Street, thinking as I paid of all the free food I was missing at the office pitch-ins. Before I'd finished my last burger, my mobile rang.

"Got him," Neuman said. "He's receiving disability payments from Social Security. But I hope he's not trying to live on what they're sending him."

I asked where in Nevada the checks were being delivered, though I was secretly hoping that his address was nearer to home.

"He's back in Indiana. In Greenfield, of all places. Maybe he's a James Whitcomb Riley fan."

That Hoosier poet's hometown was a thirty-minute drive east of Indianapolis. A short drive, in other words, but long enough for me to sketch out the rest of my Christmas story. I was seeing Donica as the mystery donor of the Saturn. How he'd managed it on his disability checks, I had no idea. Maybe he'd had some money left from an insurance settlement. I also didn't know why he was pretending to be dead. The reasons I considered included Donica's ongo-

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ing remorse over having deserted his wife and child and the possibility that he had been horribly disfigured in the accident. I was pulling for the remorse angle because the fairy-tale ending I saw for the story was a holiday reconciliation of Tony and Marguerite, brought about by the divine intercession of the *Star Republic*.

The address Neuman had given me belonged to an old building not far from Greenfield's courthouse square. The structure resembled a two-story army barracks, though it had been covered in some kind of composite material intended by its manufacturer to look like shake shingles. Extremely large and extremely flat shake shingles. The building had a fire escape on each end and other indications that it was an apartment building, but no sign giving its name. The names of the tenants appeared on a row of rural mailboxes wired to a wooden fence. Tony Donica occupied apartment 1B.

Donica was in, but not receiving visitors. When I knocked on his door, it opened only as wide as its security chain would permit, which, luckily for me, wasn't as wide as the muzzle of the Rottweiler that tried to bull its way out. Behind the door, in the shadows, I could just see Donica, his face a little lower than my chest, the height of a man in a wheelchair.

"What the hell do you want?" he demanded, the words so slurred I knew he was as drunk as the revelers back at the *Star Republic*.

I identified myself and told him I wanted to talk about his daughter. He then offered to sell me an interview. Twenty dollars for five minutes. I passed the money in.

We talked in Donica's combination living room, dining room, and bedroom, a dank, dirty place that made me glad I hadn't sprung for the ten-minute interview. Donica had lost both legs above the knee, and the only clear spaces in the apartment were the pathways he used to wheel his chair from his unmade bed to his cluttered table or out to his bathroom or kitchenette.

"What about Tina?" he asked to get the clock running. "Something happen to her?"

I could see a trace of the good looks that had won the hearts of Marguerite and the ill-fated, unnamed blonde, though his chin was unshaved and his hair both unwashed and uncombed.

I told him I'd come about the car Tina had prayed for and gotten for Christmas. Donica's expression conveyed as much comprehension as that of the dog seated beside him.

"Why would a little brat need a car?"

I told him it had been a present for her mother.

"That bitch," Donica said. "What kind of car?" And, when I'd told him, "A piece of crap. I had a Trans Am."

He pointed to a framed photo of a gleaming black car. I looked around for a picture of Tina, but didn't spot one.

I started to tell him about the roof Tina was praying for.

Donica cut in with, "What do you care about some church in

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Milwaukee?"

It was my turn to look blank.

"Milwaukee," Donica repeated, sounding out the word as though for a child. "Where that fireman Marguerite married took her and the brat. My mother told me all about it, so don't think I don't know."

By then, I was starting to realize the extent of what Donica didn't know. He didn't know that Tina and Marguerite were still in Indianapolis. He didn't know about last year's Christmas miracle or this year's. That didn't seem possible after all the airtime the Indianapolis television stations had devoted to the story. Their signals carried to Greenfield easily. I gave the apartment a closer examination. There was no television in sight.

When I asked Donica about that, he said, "I hate television. People on television have legs." He added, a little defensively, "I've got a great stereo. With satellite radio. No commercials."

No local news, either. That left the original newspaper story about Tina, the one that had produced the car. The *Star Republic* sold a suburban edition in Greenfield. I asked Donica if he ever saw the paper.

"Waste of good beer money," he said.

When I'd first heard that Donica had chosen to settle in little Greenfield, I'd thought it was part of his plan to pass himself off as dead. Now it seemed that the remote location had to be part of someone else's plan. Donica confirmed that when I asked him about his apartment.

"My mom got me this place cheap. One of her old hen friends owns the building. If I had the money, I'd have a place in Indy. On South Meridian, where all the bars are. There isn't a bar in this town worth wheeling myself to."

So the same woman who had lied to her son about Marguerite marrying and moving north had tucked Donica away at a safe distance. That was to protect the lie she'd told him and the one she'd told Marguerite, namely that her son had died in Las Vegas. Without a television or a newspaper or a neighborhood bar, he was as isolated as he would have been on the moon. His mother could let her granddaughter have a week of celebrity without worrying too much about Donica finding out.

I was wondering how to break the truth to him when he said, "You never answered me. Why does your paper care about some church in Milwaukee? You said the brat's praying for a roof. The little bitch. She's a chip off the old bitch block, I bet. If she's got an in with God, she should be praying for new legs for her old man. I'd shake them out of her if I could get my hands on her.

"You said you came here because of the car she prayed for. Why? You expect me to cry for you because I didn't get one?"

My theory seemed ridiculous now, but I'd spent twenty bucks to confirm it, so I ran it by him.

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Donica laughed himself into a hacking fit. "You think I bought that car for Marguerite? You think if I had the money for a car I'd waste it on that bitch? Is she here taking care of me like a woman's supposed to? Hell no. She's in Milwaukee, screwing some goddamn fireman. If only I'd married her like she begged me to. Me and Zeus would have that bitch walking around here on her knees." He rubbed the dog's head vigorously. "Wouldn't we, boy?"

So much for my bright idea about the Saturn. That left the Christmas miracle I'd been contemplating, the reuniting of Tina and her mother with Donica. The thought that I'd almost done that, had almost blurted out to Donica that Marguerite believed him dead, literally made me dizzy. I felt as though I were standing on the edge of a cliff with one foot in the air.

Donica snapped me out of it by saying, "Your time's up. Get out of here or I'll have Zeus chase you out."

I drove back downtown, intending to join the *Star Republic*'s Christmas parties, now well under way. But when I got off the interstate, I drove to St. Mary's. I still wanted to find the person who had donated the car. More than that, I wanted to hear the person say that a vision of the Virgin or a surplus of Dickensian Christmas spirit had motivated the gift. I no longer cared what the motive was, as long as it was positive. I needed something to counteract the darkness I'd found in Greenfield. But to locate the mystery donor, I had to do something dark myself.

On my earlier visit, I'd left St. Mary's by a back door very near the rectory. I tried that door now and found it unlocked. On my way to the Altar Rosary room I worked out strategies for separating Marguerite and Mrs. Donica, but I didn't need one. The "mother-in-law" was seated alone in the little room, knitting.

It was a picture worthy of the front of a greeting card, but when the woman looked up and saw me, her expression instantly soured and the needles she held suddenly looked as dangerous as her son's dog.

"What are you doing back here?" she demanded.

I told her I'd just been to Greenfield, and that was enough. She was out of her seat so fast she might have stabbed me before I'd raised a hand, if she'd headed for me and not the door.

"You can't tell Marguerite," she said when she had it safely closed. "You can't. She'd run to him, and that would be the end of her and her better life. I know. I lived with Tony's father for twenty years. And Tony's worse." She blessed herself again. "It isn't just his legs. It's him. I won't let Marguerite sacrifice herself. I won't let little Tina live like that, maybe grow up like that herself."

I told Mrs. Donica that it might not be necessary for me to speak to Marguerite. I only wanted the name of the previous owner of the Saturn. Mrs. Donica could tell me that herself.

She understood the bargain at once: Give me the donor's name

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and let the *Star Republic* take some of the glitter away from the original miracle, or I would tell Marguerite everything. It was a bluff, but she didn't call it.

"It wasn't a person," she said, her voice flat and tired. "It was a company. Friendly Motors. In Terre Haute."

Halfway to the door, I turned and asked her why she'd let Tina risk a second vigil. There was always the chance some friend of Donica's might pass him the word.

"I didn't want it to happen again," she said. "But I could never say no to her."

I thought she meant Tina. Then she glanced toward an old painting of a smiling woman in blue, and I was no longer sure.

Terre Haute was farther west of Indianapolis than Greenfield was east. I tried phoning Friendly Motors from my car, got a busy signal, and decided to make the drive. If my call had gone through, I never would have learned the truth, because the man who knew the answer, Marshall Henson, owner and manager of Friendly Motors, intended to take the secret to his grave.

Henson made that clear to me before he'd finished shaking my hand. "Swore I'd never tell a soul and I never will," he said as he ushered me into his tiny office. He was an older gentleman whose white hair and dentures shared an identical yellow tinge.

"That's the only Christmas miracle I've been involved with since I helped General Patton lift the siege of Bastogne in 'forty-four, and I'd hate to do anything to foul it up. Not that I don't tell the story of that Saturn to folks," he added, gesturing toward the wall to my right. "But I never tell the name of the man who bought the car."

The wall Henson had indicated was so cluttered with sales awards and group photos of dealership-sponsored softball teams that it took me a moment to spot something connected to Tina Vasquez. That something was a framed newspaper article describing how Tina and her mother had found the Saturn. The story was dated December 26 and carried the *Star Republic*'s name at the top. It was the work of a reporter I knew very well, a frustrated novelist named Joan Johnson.

"I insisted that the buyer send me a copy of whatever the Indy paper ran about the car so I'd have a memento," Henson said. "Tell you the truth, I asked for the clipping so I'd be sure the guy hadn't been pulling my leg. I gave him a great deal on that car because of the story about the little girl—five thousand even for a really nice car—and I wanted to be sure he wasn't ripping me off.

"Anyway, he kept his side of the bargain, so I have to keep mine. Sorry you drove all the way over here for nothing."

I accepted his apology, even though my drive hadn't been for nothing. I'd seen a very rare thing, a Xerox copy of a newspaper article that had never run. Boxleiter himself had told me earlier that day that he'd personally killed the Vasquez follow-up story.

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I drove back a little faster than I'd driven out. On the way, I placed a call to Joan Johnson. It took awhile for the person who answered her phone to locate Joan. While I waited out the search, I listened to loud voices and laughter and even singing. I decided the office parties were reaching their zenith, which Joan confirmed when she finally came on the line.

"Where are you? You're going to miss all the fun. In fact, you've missed most of it already."

I told her I was on my way in and asked if she remembered writing the second Tina Vasquez story.

"One of my better efforts," Joan said, "so of course it ended up in the trash. Boxleiter gave me the assignment himself, asked me to run him off a page proof. Then he told me he'd decided not to use it."

I asked her if she'd ever gotten her proof back.

"Why would I have wanted that? Anytime I need scrap paper, I just tear off a page of my novel. Hurry up back here. People are starting to sneak out."

I did hurry, but Joan had been right. By the time I reached the paper's employee parking lot, half the spaces were empty.

I nearly ran on my way inside. Then I did run up the stairs to the third floor, where the offices of the credit union were located. The lights were still on and two of the clerks, Dee and Lois, were still on duty, though both looked as though they'd been at the Christmas cheer.

I walked in as casually as my shortness of breath would allow, wished them a happy holiday, and mentioned that someone in Accounting had brought in a male stripper. They asked me to watch the phones and left abruptly.

So abruptly that Dee forgot to sign off her computer terminal, a serious breach of security. I sat down at it, located the records of Emanuel Noel Boxleiter, and learned that he'd made a sizable withdrawal exactly one year before. A five-thousand-dollar withdrawal.

Boxleiter was still in his darkened office, looking out at the lights of the park beneath his windows.

When he noticed me standing there, he asked, "So?"

I knew the question referred to his real concern, his reason for risking his secret by sending me out on the story. He was afraid, as the Friendly Motors man had been, that his leg had been pulled.

I told him the Vasquez family was as honest and deserving as they came. And that this was their last year in the miracle business.

He swung his chair around to face me. "What about the car? Did it come from the Virgin Mary after all?"

I shook my head. I told him it had come from St. Joseph, the guy who stood in the background and never got much credit.

Boxleiter grunted and said, "Maybe he never wanted any credit. Maybe just being a small part of some special kid's life was enough. Punch out and have a drink." ●

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My Kind of Beautiful

by Robert S. Levinson

On days I was starving, I took the edge off feeling sorry for myself by crashing a funeral service. This was most days after my job fell out from under me and I had run through my so-called unemployment benefits, when I was using what bucks I had set aside for a rainy day to keep a cruddy roof over my head and cheap Premium in the gas tank.

Not just anybody's funeral service, if that's what you're thinking.

Mostly a funeral service for somebody like Noel Webster, the flamboyant playboy-entrepreneur who created a multibillion-dollar empire through shrewd investments, which is how I came to make the acquaintance of people who appeared anxious to give me a funeral service of my own.

Attending a service was the price I paid for the belly-filling meal I aimed to collect afterward, when the deceased's family members and friends gathered somewhere to reflect on their loss over steamer trays full of meatballs and shrimp; platters of cold cuts, salads, and vegetables; cookies and cakes; an array of beverages, usually including ice-cold brews—my preference whenever the options didn't include a nice chilled Cabernet Sauvignon or a class-act champagne like Cristal or Dom Perignon.

The odds of an upscale meal were always with me after I learned the funeral trick from my actor friend down the hall, Ty Sheridan, who said it was de rigueur in his circle, a way to survive in Hollywood between casting calls or the more steady gigs waiting tables.

He used obit pages from the *Los Angeles Daily* in showing me which were the best memorial parks, where I could count on an upscale crowd and, after memories were shared and tears shed, an upscale gathering in some upscale part of town.

Winner of third place in our 2005 Readers Award competition, Robert S. Levinson is also a rising star on the mystery book scene. His last published thriller, *Ask a Dead Man* (Five Star) received a starred review from *PW*. It will be followed up by this month's release of *Where the Lies Begin*. The California author tells us that he is currently at work on a book set in the underbelly of the music industry. P

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"Familiar names are the best, whenever you run across one, some civic leader or a big-shot millionaire," Ty said. "Usually means you can count on a bigger crowd, easier to get lost in, but steer clear of the star types or the old legends, like the Milton Berles or the Gregory Pecks, where you usually run into the need for an invitation or security you won't get past without a famous face of your own."

He went with me the first few times, until he landed a regular afternoon shift at the Casa de Sushi, so it took me awhile to get into the rhythm of the routine. What helped was making pals with the shift guards at the entrance kiosk to Eternal Palms, the memorial park of choice among the ultra-elite. They knew the game. Their price was the occasional bottle I could pocket out of a reception, their preference being anything that would not taint their breath on duty.

That's how the trouble began for me the afternoon I strutted like I belonged into the gathering for Mr. Webster.

The Webster mansion, located behind the guarded gates of Hancock Park, was one of those ominous-looking English manors found in horror flicks, only air-conditioned and better lit, with modern plumbing in more overdecorated bathrooms than the three-decker home had bedrooms. There were maybe two hundred people milling through the place as if they were on an unguided tour, scooping up canapés from sterling-silver trays being toted around by servers in starched white shirts, black plastic bow ties, and perky smiles. Jumbo clouds of undecipherable conversation floated over the rooms. The good-natured giggling and laughter that erupted frequently was common to every funeral gathering I had been to so far, as if it were ultimate proof of a life well-lived; more likely, in my mind, to celebrate the reality and relief of *Him, Not Me.*

I had just swiped a sealed pint of Stoli from a self-service bar and was eyeing a pint of Smirnoff for my other jacket pocket when a hand fastened onto my arm, surprising me. I had checked around as carefully as ever and would have sworn nobody could see me make the swift grab.

She hadn't.

Her hand flew off me and fed into a tight embrace that led to a hard kiss on the lips as I turned to face her, her tongue chasing after mine, her eyes closed in chorus with a sigh of satisfaction that lasted until she broke the clinch and stepped back to study my reaction. At once, the sexy glint illuminating her exotic emerald eyes vanished. A lopsided grin fell into a tight-mouthed stretch of embarrassment. She turned her palms to the ceiling, shook her head while sputtering words of apology.

"You're not who I thought you were," she said, brushing her hands on my shoulders and down my arms, dislodging invisible

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lint, as if that would erase her mistake.

"It's the story of my life," I said, wanting to stroke her in more ways than she was working on me. She was my age, late twenties, and my kind of beautiful—a face with the bone structure of an angel and, inside a clinging black silk dress meant more for partying than mourning, a body that could bring out the devil in any man. She was the type of woman who wouldn't give me the time of day if she owned a clock shop, even if I had the nerve to ask her the time. "Who'd you think I was?"

She shook her head. "Nobody you'd know." Her voice the texture of cotton candy as she held out her hand and gave me the glad eye again. "Faye Allyson."

"Ellis Hyland."

"Like the island?"

"The island?"

"Ellis Island. Where the immigrants used to come into the country; in New York. Nobody ever ask you that before?"

"Nobody. It's Hyland. With an H."

"With an E."

"Huh?"

"Faye with an E. Sometimes it's spelled without. . . . What do your friends call you?"

I didn't understand the question at first. "Oh, a nickname, you mean. No nickname. Usually Ellis or, if they know me real well, Hyland."

"With an H." Her smile was glowing again and inspiring mine. "Me, neither. Just Faye, except for some relationships that ended with me being called Bitch or, you know, worse?"

"You'll always be Faye to me," I said.

"The sweetest thing anyone has said to me in ages," Faye said. She pried her hand free of my fingers and threw herself into a clinch that climaxed with a harder and deeper kiss than before. She borrowed a pencil from the bartender and scribbled something on a cocktail napkin. "I have to leave now, but call me sometime," she said, folding the napkin and pushing it into my jacket pocket.

She poked a hole in my chin and melted into the crowd, pausing once to turn and blow me an air kiss. I thought about tracking after her, but almost immediately was stalled at the bar by a distinguished-looking silver-haired six-footer filling out an expensive black cashmere suit garnished with a black armband and lapel carnation—his face the kind you'd expect to see on the cover of *Forbes* magazine; his voice as suave as his pencil-thin silver moustache.

He signaled a greeting with his wineglass and said, "Shame about our friend, Noel, wouldn't you say?"

"We all have to go sometime."

"Nothing Noel ever believed," he said. "You knew him well?"

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"Well enough to be here today," I said.

He nodded as if he didn't notice my tongue on fire. "And Doreen, I saw."

"Who?"

"Doreen," he said again, and leaned over, closer to my ear, as if I might be hard of hearing. "Doreen Kyle, that old devil's mistress." He rumbled out a salacious laugh. "We'll never know if she's what brought on the fatal heart attack, but as good a guess as any, since she was there when it happened." He raised his crystal goblet and toasted her: "To Doreen, who proved the old bugger had a heart after all."

Doreen, not Faye with an E?

Kyle with an E?

A heart-stopper by any name.

"To Doreen," I agreed, raising my glass.

We clanked. We sipped. He showed off his perfect teeth, gave me a few good-boy pats on the shoulder, wheeled around, and weaved across the room to whisper into the ear of an overweight gent dressed in dollar signs who looked up from his stockpile of goodies and aimed his heavy-lidded eyes at me, nodding affirmatively to whatever he was hearing.

About fifteen minutes later, I slipped some cocktail napkins I had packed with hors d'oeuvres into my pockets and waved *adieu* to invisible friends. Outside, Doreen Kyle was waiting for her car, heavy into conversation with the gent with the pencil-thin moustache. I waved off an eager parking attendant and headed for my Benz, a dusty relic of the 'eighties that I had discreetly curbed outside the Hancock Park gates, down three blocks and around the corner. Wondering if I'd be able to muster the courage to phone Doreen, even if only to ask why she had played a name game with me, somebody she didn't know, had never met; a stranger off the street, crashing a memorial service to scarf a free meal. Well, maybe not the last part.

Doreen. Doreen Kyle—

It didn't sound as right as *Faye Allyson* had sounded.

Didn't fit her as well, either.

She looked more like a Faye Allyson than a Doreen Kyle.

I tried putting her out of mind, but she refused to budge and was still consuming my thoughts when I got back to my apartment, a one-bedroom on the second floor of one of the 'thirties-style buildings lining both sides of Detroit Street, south of Melrose Avenue. Mine was the last one feeding off a narrow central hallway perfumed by years of dust and an undecipherable stew of cooking odors.

I stored the Stoli and Smirnoff I'd kited on the kitchen counter, then pulled a dinner plate from the cabinet and began transferring my captured hors d'oeuvres from the napkins in my pocket, unfolding one napkin at a time. Faye's napkin was the last one out and came with a surprise. I discovered she'd used some sleight of

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hand to give me more than a phone number.

Wrapped in her napkin was a flash drive, one of those tiny portable gizmos you plug into a computer and transfer data onto. This one was about the size and shape of a cigarette tube lighter. An immediate overdose of curiosity propelled me back to the living room and my desktop computer. I fiddled after an open slot that would take the drive, and clicked into its contents.

Only, I couldn't get past the opening screen.

It called for a password.

I didn't have a password.

So I called Doreen Kyle, instead.

And, when I heard that sultry satin voice that became unforgettable the moment I first heard it at Noel Webster's mansion, I called her "Faye."

"Who is this?" she said.

"Ellis Hyland," I said, my voice clearly less memorable than hers. "It's Ellis Hyland, Faye."

"Ellis Island." A question mark running under the surface.

"Earlier today? The gathering for Mr. Webster? Hyland with an H?"

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about, so goodbye with a G," she said.

And clicked off.

I punched in her number again.

She picked up on the first ring, a warning the first words through her memorable lips: "No more. Quit or I'm calling the cops."

And clicked off again.

Before I could swat away my rankle or fall into some serious sulking, my phone rang.

Her.

Saying, "I was just playing with your mind, Hyland with an H."

"Faye?"

"I want to see you again." Her voice was husky with anticipation. She sounded as anxious as my beating heart. "Are you free for dinner?"

Her address took me to the electronically controlled main entrance gate of "High-Rise Heaven," what everyone called the condominium buildings south of Century City, where prices start at a million five for one-bedrooms on the lowest floors, with balcony views limited to neighbors' useless picture windows across grounds as lush as a tropical paradise.

Faye's condo was on the twenty-second floor, which promised an unrestricted view of the city in every direction, eastward clear to the Pacific. In fact, it turned out to be all the twenty-second floor, accessible by invitation only on a private elevator that took a security key to operate. Only, it didn't turn out to be Faye greeting me

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as the door slid open.

Nobody I recognized, that's who it was.

She was tinier than Faye by a few inches, with one of those compact athletic bodies she was displaying in a well-stocked halter top and tennis shorts that ended in a tie with her muscular thighs. Her fire-engine-red hair pulled back from her handsome freckled face into a tight ponytail. Her brown eyes digesting me while her tongue lubricated lips frozen into a seductive smile.

"Hyland with an H?" she said.

"And you're?"

"Faye with an E," she said.

"I don't think so," I said. I scanned past her and around, pausing a second or two to take in the Picasso oil on the embossed white silk wall covering. Large. Not cheap. Cubist period. The lady in the portrait looking like she'd been constructed by some cockeyed Dr. Frankenstein.

"Oh, damn. Somebody else I couldn't fool." She hooted and, grabbing me by the wrist, tugged me from the elevator and pointed toward a living room the size of Nevada. "I'm Faye's roomie. She had to run out for a few. Said to entertain you until she gets back. Then, I'll be gone—like the wind."

On another wall, a Degas, a Chagall, and, not as out of place as you might think, a Warhol canvas, four images of a grim-faced Noel Webster in clashing colors. Webster also the star of most of the photographs in crystal or sterling-silver frames on top of the baby grand piano parked by the floor-to-ceiling window looking northwest to the Hollywood hills, the HOLLYWOOD sign rising above the rooftops, the dome of the Griffith Park Observatory still higher.

She parked me on an oversized, overstuffed leather sofa and duck-walked across the room to the bar. She called, "Name your poison. I'm having a nice glass of Beaujolais myself. The genuine item. Imported. Every year a good year or it wouldn't be here. That's how Mr. Webster was about everything he touched."

I indicated the Beaujolais was fine for me and said, "Including Faye?"

"Including Faye. And she had a special touch for him. Believe it."

"And you?"

"Someone has to keep this oasis tidy, you follow? Beats me trying to make the rent all by my lonesome on the dump we'd been sharing in the valley. North Hollywood, where drive-by shootings are treated like a neighborhood sport." She padded over with our wines and settled on one of the matching leather chairs across the coffee table from me. "Cheers," she said. "Name's Tiffany, by the way. From the breakfast of the same name."

I acknowledged the toast and swirled the wine around in my glass like I knew what I was doing, then sipped and rinsed. Gave the Beaujolais a thumbs-up and swallowed. Took a bigger taste

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and settled the glass on the table. Checked my watch. Gave her an inquiring look.

She shrugged. "Any minute, I'm guessing." We fell into a brief, awkward silence before she looked up from the invisible finger scribbles she was making on the table and asked, "You remember to bring it?"

"Remember to bring what?"

"The gizmo? The flash thingie Faye gave you when you guys hooked up today at Mr. Webster's send-off? She said she gave it to you for safekeeping until dinner tonight." She raised an eyebrow, but my suspicions were already higher that something was wrong here. I'd been thinking how a Noel Webster would be too shrewd, too discreet, to have a third party, a "roomie" by any name, around twenty-four/seven. It was too awkward for a man who certainly hadn't made his name, reputation, and fortune without wiser calculation than that.

I planned to ask Faye later, but nothing Tiffany had just said made sense to me.

I said, "Gizmo? Flash thingie? All I got from Faye was her phone number."

"That's not what she told me, Hyland with an H."

I killed a minute over a couple swallows of Beaujolais.

I said, "Maybe you misunderstood? What's the big deal anyway?"

She dropped her smile, closed her eyes, and grunted, then announced to the room, "He's going to make a game of this," prompting a door to open behind me.

We were joined by the sleek silver-haired six-footer who'd approached me at the reception. The one who told me Faye's name was Doreen Kyle, said she was Webster's mistress, and was with her outside when I left.

He said, "Is that so, Mr. Hyland? If so, I would have to say that's not the smartest decision you've ever made in your lifetime, which may be coming to a conclusion earlier than you'd ever have supposed."

The three of us could have drowned in my sweat before he answered my *Just what the hell is going on here?* First, he squeezed his face into one of those looks people use to say a question is unnecessary or stupid or silly and dismissed it with a flick of the hand as he padded to the bar. He encouraged me to make note of the blue-barreled .22-caliber pistol Tiffany had pulled from somewhere and was pointing at my gut while he helped himself to a double pour of sixty-year-old Macallan, praising it as deservedly the world's most expensive scotch en route to a spot beside her chair, where he proceeded to make a game of Tiffany's ponytail.

"What's going on here?" he said. "What does it sound like? You possess something that Doreen should not have given you, Mr. Hyland. We want it for ourselves."

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"Faye—Doreen, she said I had it? Where is she? She okay?"

"She played as ignorant as you, only with more flair, insisting yours was a casual conversation, no more, and she had no idea who you were or where or how to find you, unless you availed yourself of the phone number she provided."

"All true."

"You're saying you're not her partner in crime."

"I'm saying I crashed the party, that's all."

"Then how fortuitous of you to phone when you did, but she was too quick to get rid of you, confirming our belief you now have the flash drive. We were equally quick in phoning back. Our Tiffany is an exceptional mimic, wouldn't you say? Cheers!" He gave Tiffany's ponytail a playful tug. "Hand the drive over, we'll be gone from here, and you can live happily ever after."

"And Faye?"

"What about Doreen? The name she was using when she worked her way into Mr. Webster's company, then his bed, then this elaborate love nest he keeps for his mistresses of the moment—stealing his heart so she could steal the contents of the flash drive. Doreen Kyle."

"You get the flash drive, she also gets to live happily ever after?"

"So you do have it."

"Just asking. Does she?"

He didn't have to think about his answer. "Doreen has been a naughty, naughty girl and will have to be punished. Isn't that so, Tiffany?" Another tug at her ponytail.

"Knock it off, Barron." She swatted away his hand. "We still don't know if the doofus has it on him. What say, Doofus? A yes, a no, or a body search that'll have you singing boy soprano in no time flat?"

I believed her, but as much as I wanted to get rid of the damned drive, I have this insatiable curiosity jones—it made me the highest-paid game-show researcher on network TV for eleven years before a ratings nosedive knocked *Million-Dollar Money Machine* into swift oblivion.

"How about a maybe?" I said.

This Barron guy frowned. "I don't believe that Tiffany invited a negotiation, Mr. Hyland."

Tiffany uncorked a laugh and rolled her eyes at the ceiling. "Doofus thinks he's Harrison Ford or Bruce Willis. Tom Cruise. Matt Damon. It don't work like that in real life, Doofus."

"Maybe first you explain what's so important about the flash drive and then I tell you where it is?"

"Ah, progress of a kind," Barron said. "But surely you already know the answer?"

"Humor me. Pretend it's the real-estate round of *Million-Dollar Money Machine.*"

"I prefer *Jeopardy* myself." He looked off, as though he was

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enjoying his own humor, but he was all business seconds later. "For all his outwardly sunny disposition, Noel Webster was a shady character on the international landscape. The information he accumulated through devious means, which was then covertly copied onto the flash drive by his wily mistress, is designed to bring down governments."

"*Jeopardy* sucks. Whose government? Which?"

His head shifted left and right. "That makes it worth millions to certain parties—like the people she agreed to sell it to. Only, she got greedy."

"*The people.* Would that be you and the man-eater?"

Tiffany showed me the length of her middle finger.

Barron said, "Didn't Doreen tell you who when she brought you into her scheme?"

"Nice try."

"We contacted her after she put the drive up for bid. The exchange was scheduled for the reception. Only, Doreen had a change of mind. I suspect she continued shopping and found a buyer willing to go higher. Yes, Mr. Hyland? That's it, isn't it?"

"Nice try."

"All right, then. Doreen in trade for the flash drive, unless you'd rather have a cash reward."

"Doreen will do."

Barron held out his palm.

I said, "First Doreen."

At once I had the feeling he'd run out of patience with me.

Barron shut his eyes and seemed to be counting to ten, then drew a .45 automatic from inside his suit jacket.

A hundred years later, he shrugged and said, "Why not?"

He marched from the room, returning a minute later with Faye. Even handcuffed, her face lacking makeup and flushed with distress, she was my kind of beautiful. Her robe was open, confirming a body built for centerfolds. I averted my eyes.

Barron held out his hand again. I dug into a pocket for the flash drive and pitched it to him. He made a one-handed catch, flipped it to Tiffany, led Faye to the sofa, and settled her next to me.

Tiffany rested the .22 on the coffee table while she examined the drive. "How do we know this is legit? This legit, Doofus?"

"Was your birth?"

She settled a sneer on me. "You're not out of the woods yet, big mouth, so don't press what's left of your luck."

"It's the flash drive Doreen slipped me."

Barron said, "Did you monitor it?"

"I tried. Curiosity. Only got as far as the command for a password."

"The right answer. . . . Make any copies?"

"What for? I was hoping Faye—Doreen—would explain it. Why I

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called her. Why I brought it with me."

Barron said, "One last piece of business before I free Doreen and we leave you to your future. Your driver's license, please, so we'll know where to come visit you, should we discover the flash drive is other than represented."

I fished the license from my wallet and tossed it onto the coffee table.

Tiffany leaned forward to retrieve it, putting the .22 momentarily out of her reach.

Faye dove onto the table and captured the gun. She rolled onto her side and got off a two-handed shot that smashed into Barron's left eye. He went down as Faye hit the mile-high white pile carpeting on her back, Tiffany immediately on top of her.

A gunshot ended their battle before it began.

Tiffany gripped the edge of the table and struggled to her feet. She threw me a look of triumph and bowed like she was taking a curtain call; only, she kept going. Her face struck the table nose first, accompanied by a loud cracking sound, while blood splashed onto the glass surface from the modest bullet hole between her breasts.

Faye was on her knees beside Barron. She found the key to the handcuffs and freed herself, then hurried over and threw her arms around me, pressing her body tightly against mine while her lips played thank-yous over my face and neck.

She released me, saying, "I'm sorry about putting your life at risk tonight. They'd have killed us—me, for certain—if you hadn't stepped up to the plate the way you did. I owe you my life, Hyland with an H, and I always repay my debts."

Her lips found mine again, briefly, before she went after the flash drive, clutching it like a winning lottery ticket before she stashed it and the .22 in a pocket of her robe, which she didn't bother closing. She was in the process of handing over my driver's license when I said, "Is it true what they told me about you?"

The question caught her off guard. She reared to attention and crossed her arms over her breasts. "If they said I was a federal agent setting them up for a bust, yes," she said. I shook my head.

"Look, later I'll show you my ID and my gratitude, but right now the phone is over there. Call nine-one-one while I throw on some clothes." She wheeled around and fled the room, and—

That was the last I saw of Faye Allyson.

Or Doreen Kyle.

The cops sent me home after I told them enough about what I knew to satisfy them that I'd innocently wandered into some kind of lovers' quarrel that would not be untangled until Doreen Kyle turned up. Two federal agents arrived at my door the next day, flashing badges and phony smiles. They got the same story. I didn't mention the flash drive either time. I played dumb when

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the agent chewing a lump of gum surreptitiously asked about "Faye Allyson" and answered their questions about *Million-Dollar Money Machine,* most dealing with Honeychile Lane, the cover girl who operated the money-machine lever.

It took a few weeks before the story a columnist for the *Los Angeles Daily* tagged "The Mystery of the Missing Mistress" faded into a few paragraphs on the back pages of the news section, then disappeared entirely. By then, I'd received enough media attention to get work doing research for *Jeopardy* and *Who Dies Next?,* a reality pilot for Fox.

The jobs lasted a couple of months and I was able to catch up on outstanding debts before the money ran out and I went back to feeding myself after funeral services.

Every so often, I slugged the flash drive into my computer and wondered what I'd learn were I able to bust the password.

Wondered who the customers were and the small fortune the drive would bring if I knew where to sell it.

Wondered if I'd still be alive had Barron and Tiffany learned that what I'd handed them was blank, a last-second substitution I made before leaving home, planning to use my "Oops!" as an excuse to see Faye Allyson again.

Most of all, I wondered about Faye, who had skipped out of Noel Webster's love nest leaving behind ambiguity and unanswered questions.

And me.

I was trying to decide between another Beluga on blini or the Kobe beef on toast points at the gathering for Martin Gardener, the real-estate tycoon who'd made his billions turning Indian desert wasteland into gambling spas, when some sixth sense made me turn around.

The woman sauntering toward me from halfway across the tented courtyard was my kind of beautiful, tall, lean, and lanky, her body as sublime as a building designed by Frank Gehry, sending temptation inside a black mourning dress that quit mid-thigh and contained swaying breasts that cried for attention. Her platinum-blond hair piled high to give fuller display to an angelic face promising heaven on earth. Her green eyes flashing lustful signals to go with equally dangerous lips that I recognized even before they connected with mine.

"Hello, Faye," I said, when I could breathe again.

"Not Faye," she said. "Helena."

"Elena?"

She shook her head and brightened the tent with her smile. "Helena. With an H. Same as Hyland with an H."

"You'll always be Faye to me," I said, reaching into my pocket for the flash drive I always carried with me against this moment. ●

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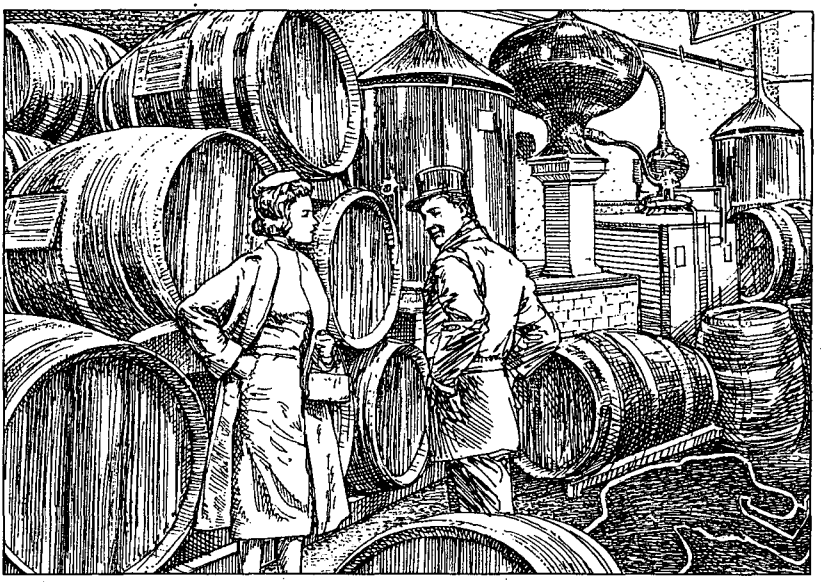

Art by Allen Davis

DISTILLING THE TRUTH

by Marilyn Todd

The instant Marie-Claude's husband told her that he'd compiled a dossier detailing the chief inspector's corruption, complete with dates, names, and times, then placed the file personally in the hands of the commissioner, she knew it was all over. No wonder he waited until he'd finished his *tartiflette* to tell her what he'd done. She'd have thrown the damned dish on the floor and to hell with dinner, and he could have whistled for his *île flottante* as well. As it was, she didn't hear him out. What on earth was the point of lengthy explanations?

"You're a fool, Luc. No one likes a whistle-blower."

"I didn't join the police to be popular."

"It's the end of your career, you know that? They won't keep you on in Paris after this!"

"Blackmail, extortion, what was I supposed to do, Marie-Claude?" He laid down *Le Figaro* and turned his gaze to her. "For years, Picard has been preying on the very people he was meant to protect. I couldn't simply turn aside."

"And I'm sure the commissioner shook your hand and thanked you warmly for your efforts."

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One side of Luc's face twisted uncomfortably. "Not exactly, no."

"You see? No one likes a whistle-blower. They'd rather close ranks and have a bastard in their midst than admit to one bad apple, and you already know my feelings about the commissioner."

Like when they were invited over to dinner and she overheard him talking to her husband in his study when she went to find the bathroom.

"Your wife is truculent, selfish, and a pain in the *cul*, Luc—"

The rest was drowned by children's laughter upstairs, but who cared? That was the last time she'd eat at that pig's house, she told Luc, and if her husband felt bad about making excuses when future invitations arrived, then so much the better. She wanted nothing to do with a man who insulted her, and it wouldn't have hurt Luc to have stuck up for her, either.

"—couldn't agree more, sir—"

Truculent and selfish, her *cul*. She pushed her thick curls back from her face. She had married too young, that was the trouble, and to a man ten years older than herself at that. Admittedly, after six years Luc was no less handsome and his back was as strong, but that type of love can't sustain a marriage indefinitely. And when he wasn't working all the hours *le bon Dieu* sent, he had his head stuck in a file or wanted to talk politics, and not even French politics, either. Honestly! Who cared whether rich diamond deposits had been found in Siberia or how many communists this Senator Mc-Whatever-His-Name accused in the American State Department? What was going to actually change people's lives were things like the new television transmissions that were now coming out in colour, not some piece of paper signed by Egypt and Britain over a canal in Suez that Luc insisted was going to have far-reaching consequences. But however exasperated Marie-Claude got with her husband, she'd never once known him to lose his temper.

Not even when, a mere fortnight after Luc delivered his sanctimonious dossier, the commissioner transferred him to Cognac.

"You'll like the South," Luc said confidently, as their train pulled away. "Twice as much sunshine, warmer summers, better winters—"

Marilyn Todd's name will forever be linked in most readers' minds with Ancient Rome. Her twelfth book in the series whose protagonist, Claudia Seferius, solves mysteries while plying her trade as a wine merchant was published in January. (See *Sour Grapes*/Severn House.) In this short story, however, Ms. Todd chooses for her setting Cognac, France, the town in which she recently settled, and a time in the not too distant past.

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"Better theatres, Luc? Will they have better street cafés and shops? Will they get subtitled versions of *On the Waterfront,* do you think?" By all accounts, it was set to scoop an Oscar. "Will they have better parks? Better gardens? Women in *peignoirs* leaning over the balconies, calling obscenities to men in the street?"

He looked at her beneath lowered lids as the train chugged through the forests of Rambouillet. "You never liked Montmartre."

"It had life," she retorted. "It had character and substance, it was always noisy, colourful, constantly changing—"

Marie-Claude broke off. Why was she referring to these things in the past tense? For heaven's sake, it wasn't as though she wasn't going back! No, no, once she'd seen Luc settled in (she owed him that) she would start a new life. A new life with a man who appreciated art, the cinema, fashion, and fun. Someone who liked dancing, for sure!

"I'll bet they've never heard of Perry Como in Cognac."

"You can probably count yourself lucky if they've heard of Bing Crosby," he murmured behind his guidebook. "But this is promotion, Marie-Claude. We're lucky to get it. Do you want to look through this, by the way?"

Marie-Claude shook her head. She'd seen enough of those vines and flat-bottomed boats from upside down, thank you.

"We'll be able to afford a house of our own instead of a poky apartment on the fifth floor where you can hear everything that happens next-door. We're close to the seaside, and I'll bet the air's better, too."

There was nothing wrong with the air in the Rue du Roc, she wanted to say, but his nose was back in the pamphlet and, as Orleans rumbled past, she stroked the hat in her lap. Such a jaunty little number, as well. *Très* Audrey Hepburn, with just a dash of Ava Gardner. She sighed and closed her eyes. By the time she got a chance to wear it again, it would either have too many feathers or too few, and who would be seen dead wearing green for next season? At Tours, the only other couple in the carriage got off and an old woman with a runny nose got in.

"Amazing," Luc said, turning the page of his paper to avoid creasing it. "It says here construction's under way on the St. Lawrence Seaway that'll allow deep-draught ships direct access to the rich industrials of the Great Lakes. Direct access. Can you imagine?"

Marie-Claude switched off. Her husband was clever, conscientious, honourable, but dull. Handsome, rugged, muscular, and tall, yet he lacked passion where it really counted. And now, it seemed, he was a failure into the bargain.

At Angoulême they changed trains.

She blamed herself for marrying him.

❖ ❖ ❖

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A week later, the vineyards around Cognac sprang into leaf and an Englishman called Bannister ran a mile in under four minutes. Less than two months down the line, once the vines had been pruned and tied back, an Australian beat the Englishman's record, but by the time the summer sun was swelling the grapes on the hillsides, the Englishman had once again reclaimed his crown in Vancouver, Little Mo's tennis career was cut short by a riding accident, and a pair of Italians were the first climbers to reach the peak of K2. These things seemed to excite everyone except Marie-Claude, but it didn't matter, because she kept herself busy making the house nice for Luc.

It was pleasantly located in the old quarter, halfway between the chateau and the covered market, where the streets were narrow, hilly, twisting, and cobbled, and the houses built of thick stone to keep them cool in summer, retain heat in the winter, and with fireplaces large enough to secrete a small army. But an old man had lived alone here for the past twenty years and she was damned if she'd be accused of leaving her husband to a place which looked (and smelled) like a pigsty.

A week's scrub with carbolic transformed it no end, but the shutters could use a coat or three of paint and although she'd considered returning to Paris in August, the weather was perfect for strolls along the towpath, and whilst Marie-Claude knew of lots of people who didn't bother with curtains and just used the shutters, Luc worked so hard that the very least he deserved, if he wasn't to have a decent dinner waiting on the table, was to be able to pore over his paperwork in a house that was cosy. One or two rooms, that was all. Bedroom. *Salon.* Enough to lend a bit of warmth and character where it mattered the most.

By the time workers had been drafted in for the harvest and Pope Pius X had been canonised, the Algerians had started a guerrilla war against their French protectors, "This Ole House" was on everyone's lips, and Marie-Claude had run up another pair of drapes, this time for the kitchen, and accepted the offer of part-time work in an upmarket dress shop.

"I'll be late tonight," Luc announced one lunchtime, as he washed his hands in the sink. Close-by, the bells of St. Leger pealed merrily. "The proprietor of one of the smaller cognac houses has been murdered."

Marie-Claude laid the *cassoulet* on the table and lifted the lid. "Good."

"Good?" He chuckled as he sniffed appreciatively through the steam. "Some poor woman has been battered over the head and all you can say is 'good'?"

"Not good that she's dead." She heaped his plate. "Good that you've got some proper detective work to do at last."

All he'd been called upon to investigate over the past five

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months had been robbery, the inevitable smuggling, and once, right at the beginning, an art theft that turned out to be a simple insurance fraud. Luc was a first-rate detective and at last this would give him something to sink his teeth into. In fact, with such a high-profile case demanding his attention, Marie-Claude doubted he'd notice she'd left, although she might as well wait until the warm weather ended. Paris was desperately wet in October.

"Marie-Claude, this duck is delicious."

It was the market, she explained, scraping out the dish for him. So close it made shopping each day easy, and you could buy the freshest produce without it having been hanging around in vans for several days as it made its way slowly upcountry. Luc shot a covetous glance at the second pot on the stove.

"Tomorrow?"

"Certainly not!" Tomorrow she was planning *coq au vin*. "I made that for Suzette next-door. Her husband died last year from an accident in the boiler room in one of the distilleries down on the quay, so with three small children and no work, I thought it might help."

"That's very generous."

"Nonsense. We can easily afford one extra duck. My job, your pay raise—"

"No hat bills, no theatre tickets." He wiped both *cassoulet* and smile from his mouth with a serviette. "Do you miss them, Marie-Claude? Honestly?"

"If you've finished, I need to get back to the shop," she said briskly. "Madame Garreau's visiting her mother and I'm all on my own this afternoon." She scraped the bones into the bin while he brewed the coffee. "So who died, then?"

"A woman by the name of Martine Montaud—"

"Madame Montaud?" She wiped her hands on the dishcloth and set out a plate of *palmiers* still warm from the oven. "Handsome, late forties, with dark hair?"

"You know her?"

"As one would expect of the owner of a cognac house, she was one of Madame Garreau's best customers." Marie-Claude sat on the table and began swinging her legs. "Very elegant lady," she said. "Exquisitely made-up, hands neatly manicured, and I wouldn't like *her* hairdresser's bill, I can tell you." She sighed. "I shall miss her coming in, though," she added. "She never took offence when I told her what didn't suit her—"

"Marie-Claude, that's the reason Madame Garreau adores you. You give her clientele an honest appraisal and you don't hold back. People respect that."

She wondered how he could possibly know her employer's opinion. As far as she knew, Luc had never met Madame Garreau, but

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that was beside the point. No woman wants to be told lilac suits her when it makes her look bland, any more than being sold the concept that wide stripes will flatter her hips. Especially Madame Montaud, who invariably left the shop hundreds of francs lighter, but every inch looking the successful businesswoman she was.

"She never struck me the type to get herself murdered," Marie-Claude said, sipping her coffee. "Well, not bashed on the head, anyway. It seems so . . . vulgar."

"You'd have preferred she was strangled?"

She shot him a look to say that wasn't funny. "Who killed her, do you have any idea?"

"Everything points to the cellar master," he said sadly. "Like that art theft back in May, there's very little detective work involved in this case. Oh, and talking of art, I suppose you know Matisse is dead?"

"Cellar master? Luc, the cellar master of a cognac house is just one step below God. He's not just responsible for the blend, he oversees the whole process of distillation from beginning to end, he even chooses the oak trees from which the barrels are made that will store his precious cognac, for heaven's sake!"

"And you know this because . . . ?"

"Suzette. I told you. Her husband died in a boiler-room fire." She brushed a curl out of her eyes with the back of her hand. "We spend a lot of time talking when she picks up the kids."

"You *babysit?*"

"Don't sound so surprised. It gives her a chance to do a typing course and—*hein.* The point is, you're looking at the wrong person, Luc. The cellar master couldn't possibly have clonked Madame Montaud on the head. That wouldn't have been *his* style, either."

"Ah. You'd have preferred he strangled her?"

"That wasn't funny the first time, and besides! What motive would he have for killing his employer?"

"Something sexual, probably, it usually is." Luc shrugged as he reached for the last pastry. "Money or sex lies at the root of most murders, plus his were the only fingerprints that we lifted and I found one of her earrings in his bed—"

"It was so obvious, you searched his house?"

"Not exactly." He leaned his weight against the back of the chair and folded his arms over his chest. "But because her body was found in the cellars, I conducted a thorough search of the entire factory, including the distillery, which happens to have a small room sectioned off that serves as the cellar master's bedroom."

"Only from November until March, when distillation takes place around the clock and he needs to be on hand night and day."

"Suzette?"

"Suzette."

"Hmm." He scratched his chin. "Well, if you know so much about

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the process for making cognac and you don't believe my suspect is the killer, why don't you go up there and tell me who is?"

Marie-Claude jumped down from the table. "I'll need a cardigan."

"What about the shop?" he called up the stairs, and look! it proved the acoustics in this house were rubbish. It sounded for all the world as though he was laughing.

"What about the shop?" she called back, reaching for her green hat with the feathers. "They're rich, these women. They can afford to wait awhile longer."

Poor Madame Montaud could not.

The Domaine de Montaud lay on the north side of Cognac, protected by woodlands and snug inside a bend in the river. For almost two thousand years, vineyards had covered its sun-kissed slopes, which gazed over the valley of the Charente and the hills that unfolded beyond, but its acidic soil produced a wine whose low alcohol content played havoc with its conservation and so, in the seventeenth century, foreign merchants hit upon the idea of importing it in spirit form and diluting it on arrival. Because of the double distillation process involved, the Dutch named this spirit *brandwijn*—burnt wine—which had the added advantage of being cheaper to ship. But no matter how economical the costs of transport, when recession hits, luxury goods are the first to suffer. Huge stocks of brandy piled up in the cellars. Things were not looking good.

Until local producers noticed that their spirit not only improved with age, it tasted even better drunk neat . . .

But as cognac was born, so evolved a world of secrets and magic. In each dark saturated cellar, the cellar master became sorcerer, blending smooth with mellow, amber with gold, elegance with subtlety, to produce a unique and individual range of cognacs, from the youngest, at under five years, to prestigious reserves that had been maturing in oak casks for decades.

Marie-Claude had imagined such sorcerers to be sober, unsmiling, aloof, and dull. Undertakers in different suits. If they were, Alexandre Baret broke the mould.

"Enchanté, madame."

Any other time and the eyes behind the spectacles would be twinkling flirtatiously. The crows' feet either side said so. But today they only viewed the inspector's assistant with mistrust, and were clouded with something else, too. Guilt? Grief? Fear? Marie-Claude couldn't say, but following him through the shadowy barrel-lined chambers, their walls black from evaporation, she felt prickles rise on her scalp. With the rigorously controlled temperature, light rationed to brief and rare visits, the oaky tang to the air, it was like walking through a cathedral. That same air of rev-

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erence. Humility. Silence. Tranquility. The taking of life here seemed sacrilegious.

"I have informed the workforce that this area is out of bounds until further notice," Monsieur Baret said, studiously avoiding the outline of a body chalked on the flagstone floor. "But in any case, only a handful of employees have access, and I assure you it is quite impossible to enter without the necessary keys. Indeed," he added dryly, "one would stand a better chance breaking into the *Banque de France.*"

"You don't think this could be a robbery turned sour, then?" Marie-Claude's voice echoed softly. "After all, there are hundreds of migrants in the vineyards right now, breaking their backs to bring in the harvest."

Alexandre Baret watched dust motes dance in the air over the spot where every trace of his employer's blood had been scrubbed clean. "No, *madame,* I do not think that."

"You're not exactly helping your case," she said, and behind her heard Luc grind his teeth.

"Why?" The cellar master swung round sharply to face him. "Am I under suspicion, Inspector?"

Marie-Claude was acutely conscious that her husband didn't look at her when he replied. "Madame Montaud was found with just one emerald cluster in her left ear," he said mildly. "An identical cluster was found in your bed next to the still."

Monsieur Baret said nothing, but his eyes flickered, Marie-Claude noticed, as he opened the door from the cellars. Perhaps it was nothing more than passing from darkness into the light.

"I cannot explain that," he said at length. "But if you are suggesting—" he indicated the cramped sleeping quarters partitioned off with nothing more than wood and glass—"I'm sorry, Inspector, you are mistaken."

Marie-Claude opened the door and peered in. There was just about enough room for the bed and a small chest of drawers. The blankets did not look very clean.

"The night watchman confirms that you have been leaving very late. Past midnight on several occasions."

"I did not conduct an affair down here with Madame Montaud," Baret insisted. "That's simply too sordid to contemplate. I am a married man. And the notion that I killed her—*pff!* What possible motive would I have?"

Luc drew a carbon copy from his breast pocket. Reading upside down, Marie-Claude saw that the letter bore yesterday's date, was addressed to the cellar master, and had been typewritten.

"This was on top of the paperwork in Madame Montaud's desk," Luc said. "The desk, incidentally, that we were only able to open with the key that was found in her pocket."

Baret took the proffered letter and, as he read, the colour

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drained from his face. His jaw tightened. "I—I have never seen this before."

Marie-Claude didn't get a chance to read every last word before it disappeared back inside Luc's pocket, but the gist was enough. In the most civil of terms, Martine Montaud was dismissing her cellar master.

"Is it, do you think, too sordid to contemplate?" Luc asked once they were alone in the distillery. "Tall, fifty, and with that thick thatch of dark hair, it seems perfectly reasonable to me that the earring of the widowed and lonely Martine would end up in his bed."

"Not this bed," Marie-Claude said, sending clouds of dust into the air as she tried to pull the curtains and found the hooks had rusted solid.

"Wouldn't the risk of discovery have been the spice, though? Two educated, articulate, respected people fired by the danger of being caught in the act?"

"If there's any danger, it comes from fleas, not ruined reputations," she said, prodding the unsheeted mattress. "And anyway, who said she was lonely?"

When Madame Montaud tried on clothes in the shop, those were not sensible foundation garments she'd been wearing underneath!

"Who else has a key to the distillery and cellars?" she asked.

"No one who doesn't have a cast-iron alibi."

"While Monsieur Baret . . . ?"

"Claims he went for a walk, and if you believe that, you can believe anything." Luc ran his hand over the ticking on the bolster. "You know, Marie-Claude, just because they're both polite, refined individuals, it doesn't mean they don't enjoy the occasional foray into degeneracy."

She considered the new baby-doll pajamas that were all the rage at the moment. Both she and Luc agreed that these were the most depraved and decadent garments that had ever been invented, and indeed they'd considered them so depraved and decadent that they ripped them off no less than three times last Saturday night.

"So you're saying Alexandre met with Martine last night, as usual. They came down here, as usual, made love in his seedy little camp bed, as usual, where she lost an earring in the heat of their passion . . . then fired him?"

"No," he said, leaning his hip against the chest of drawers. "That's what the evidence is saying. Not me."

Marie-Claude threw her hands in the air. "Luc Brosset, you are the most impossible man on God's earth! If you suspected all along that this was a setup, for heaven's sake, why didn't you just come straight out with it and tell me you wanted my help?"

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"That's funny," he said. "I thought that was exactly what I had done."

Centuries had come and gone, but the method of distilling cognac hadn't changed. The still itself, the *alambic,* was made of gleaming red copper and, with its swan neck, long pipes, and balloon shape, resembled more a giant oriental hookah than a boiler. For nearly four months of the year, once the grapes had been pressed and their precious juice extracted, these three pieces of apparatus would be working night and day to produce the first distillation, the *brouillis,* before it underwent its distinctive second boiling. Only after that could the "heads" and "tails" be separated from the clear "heart" of the spirit that would eventually mature into cognac.

During these four months, though, the cellar master would virtually live next to his *alambic* while, outside, the town would grow warm from so many boilers pumping round the clock, the air would become impregnated with the sweet smell of brandy, and the characteristic black on the buildings would deepen, a symbol of status and pride. Incredibly, a tenth of the cognac was lost to evaporation, a contribution known as the angels' share. Marie-Claude wondered whether Madame Montaud would be able to distinguish her own cognac from where she sat on her cloud. And how silly to get misty-eyed over someone she hardly knew!

"The way she was killed," Luc said, "hit on the back of the head with a marble bust of the founder that took pride of place next to the *alambic,* that suggests the crime wasn't premeditated."

Marie-Claude thought about the key in her pocket. The fact that Alexandre's were the only fingerprints. The way nobody else here had access.

"It suggests an earring coming off when she fell," he continued, "and the killer taking the opportunity to implicate someone else."

She wondered what the gem-smith who made Madame Montaud's jewellery would have to say about such odds.

"Or," she said, "it's a double-bluff designed to look that way."

Luc spiked his hands through his hair. "You mean Baret planned it from the outset, then left clumsy clues that pointed directly to him, leading us to think they had been planted?"

"If it was a spur-of-the-moment act, why didn't he plead *crime passionnel* straightaway? Cellar masters are respected all over France, Luc, and think about it. Sex, rejection, dismissal? Any one of these things is enough to make a man feel emasculated and strike out in the heat of anger, yet here we have three stacked on top of each other. Alexandre Baret could have thrown up his hands and admitted his crime, and even the worst advocate in the country would have had him walking away a free man."

She stared up at the shining copper works and saw Madame

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Montaud holding up two evening dresses, the navy blue and the green. *What discount will you give me, Madame Garreau, if I take both? I see. Well, thank you for your time, but I think I'll drive into Angoulême and see— Why, yes, Madame Garreau. Ten percent would be perfectly acceptable. But shall we say twelve?*

"Madame Montaud was elegant, successful, she drove a hard bargain, but by all accounts she was fair. While a man who blends cognac that not only his successor won't see sold but *his* successor, either, is a man who is patient, clever, and selfless."

Luc scratched his head. "Are you saying he did or he didn't?"

Marie-Claude straightened her hat in the boiler's reflection. "It's late," she said. "I have to get back to the shop."

"Some joint," she murmured as they snubbed the distillery's access road in favour of the broad sweep of the drive in front of the main house.

"Twelve bedrooms, five wings, and ceilings so high you can house a giraffe in each room, should you so desire," Luc said. "And to prove how handsomely this business pays, the house is surrounded by seventeen hectares of beautiful but totally unproductive parkland."

"If you think I'd live there, you're mistaken," Marie-Claude said. "Look at the number of windows for a start. And the height of them! I'd spend all my day washing them."

"You'd have people to do that for you."

"I would not," she protested.

What? Strangers trooping all over her house, snooping all over her business?

"Some people might envy the rich for their lifestyle," she said firmly. "Not me. Madame Montaud may have been successful, but the poor woman was a martyr to the business, she barely took a day off, and look at that sister of hers. Dresses like Grace Kelly, but never gets a chance to breathe, much less be her own person. No privacy, not even a house to call her own; she and her husband still live at the Domaine. And when her husband accompanies her to Madame Garreau's shop, as he invariably does, the place stinks of stale wine and cigars for simply hours."

"Oh? And what do I stink of?"

"Nutmeg and citron and cool mountain forests," she said, and his eyes weren't just green, they crinkled at the corners and were flecked with red, grey, and brown, and his mouth twisted sideways when he smiled. With his thick mop of dark hair and square practical hands, she was glad Luc would have no trouble finding a new wife once she'd gone.

"Hmm."

He stuffed his square practical hands in his pockets and whistled "Mambo Italiano" under his breath as they sauntered past the

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bustling vineyards down the hill towards the river. Since the Domaine was only a fifteen-minute walk from the house, they hadn't bothered with the car, and Marie-Claude was wrong about the cardigan. She hadn't needed it at all.

"I don't suppose this sudden obligation to duty has anything to do with the sister?" he asked after working his way through "Three Coins in the Fountain," "Smile," and "Hernando's Hideaway."

"Madame Montaud wasn't having an affair with her cellar master," Marie-Claude said, wondering at what point her arm had become linked with his. "She ordered far too many evening gowns for an illicit liaison."

More likely she was being courted discreetly, preferring to wait and see how things developed before going public with the relationship.

"Loose women aren't taken seriously in business," she pronounced. "But her sister, Madame Delaville, now that's a different story."

Husband reeking of stale booze and smoke, choosing all her clothes? She'd lost count of the number of times she'd seen him sitting in Madame Garreau's plush armchair, squat and potbellied like a cocky little toad, while his wife paraded in unflattering suits with slow and mechanical precision.

"Natalie Delaville is a woman of loose moral standards?"

"Exactly the *opposite*," Marie-Claude said, turning the key in the shop. "Her husband has the word bully all but etched on his forehead, but the more I think about it, the more I remember that her chin hasn't drooped quite so much lately, there's been colour in her pale cheeks, and miracle of miracles, Madame Delaville actually called in half a dozen times on her own over the past month. I want to look up what she—*voilà!*"

"Well?" Luc held out his hands in exasperation. "Are you going to tell me what the little mouse bought?"

"Certainly not." Such matters were private! "But I can tell you that the dresses were feminine and flattering, and I can tell you whose account they were charged to, as well." She shot her husband a sideways glance. "Alexandre Baret."

"All right . . ." Luc rubbed his jaw in thought. "But is this actually getting us anywhere?"

"It explains his unease and reluctance to provide an alibi."

"Because he was protecting Natalie Delaville."

"Absolutely." She locked the door and tested the catch. "Now all we have to do is prove how that bitch killed Martine."

"Metamorphosis is a wonderful thing," Luc observed, stretching his pace to match hers. "One minute she's a mouse, the next she's a bitch—what? What have I said?"

"Honestly!" Marie-Claude stopped outside the baker's and shook

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her head in disbelief. "I don't know where you get your ideas, sometimes! Not Madame Delaville, Luc. She didn't kill Madame Montaud."

It was Madame Baret, of course. Alexandre's wife.

"*And* she killed the wrong woman."

As the hills slowly turned to russet and gold and the French populace finally came to terms with defeat in Indochina, the Empire State Building had been eclipsed as the world's tallest structure, civilization was facing extinction from something called Rock and Roll, and Luc had been proved right about Suez, especially in light of that botched attempt on the Egyptian president's life.

"By the way, Marie-Claude, I received a letter from the commissioner this morning."

More and more these days Luc had taken to joining her on walks along the towpath, although sometimes their route took them through the town hall park or onto the islands, where they would take a picnic providing they wrapped up warm.

"He writes that he has finally rounded up everyone involved in the blackmail and extortion ring. Some seven police officers are awaiting trial, he says, and commends me for a job well done."

"That the letter?" Marie-Claude tossed it into the Charente, where a squadron of ducks came steaming in, mistaking it for a bread roll. "You know my opinion of the commissioner."

"For the life of me, I can't imagine why."

"He said I was truculent, selfish, and a pain in the *cul.*"

Luc laughed. "Well, if you overheard that much, you'd have also heard him qualify his statement by adding that you were spirited, funny, and I was lucky to have you."

Couldn't agree more, sir, Luc had replied, and damn those horrid children upstairs for drowning out the commissioner's words.

"He congratulated me on the Montaud murder, as well." Luc stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Being a high-profile case, I suppose word found its way back to his desk, but what I'm getting to is that he ended by saying that, now the corruption ring's been wrapped up and my life is no longer in danger, there's a job for me in Paris, should we want it."

"You never told me your life was threatened!"

"Hell hath no fury like a chief inspector jailed. So then. Do we? Want that job, I mean."

"It might have been high-profile, but it wasn't exactly brain surgery, Luc."

All those late nights in the distillery, indeed! *I did not conduct an affair down here with Madame Montaud,* the cellar master had insisted, *that's simply too sordid to contemplate.* Quite right. It may have been his employer's sister he'd been carrying on with, not his employer, but he wouldn't have dreamt of taking the deli-

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cate, browbeaten Natalie to the distillery had it not been the only place where they could meet and not be either seen or overheard. His office was too close to the main works. They dared not be seen in public. So they either sat down there, talking long into the night, or they sneaked off in his car to plan their new life together, and what a lot of planning there was. For all that cellar masters are handsomely paid and live in grand houses, they still don't live like the Montauds! There would be no majestic mansion for Natalie once she left Delaville. No parklands, no servants, no prestigious balls. Alexandre had wanted her to be one hundred percent sure before making the leap. He knew there would be no going back.

For her part, of course, Madame Baret hadn't believed for a second that her husband had been required to work late.

In the way of deceived wives everywhere, she followed him, saw the lights in the distillery, knew about the bed, heard him whispering on the telephone in the hall. She'd had no trouble tracing the number to the Domaine and knew immediately who he was carrying on with. (Who else was there, for goodness' sake? Hardly that pale, downtrodden sister!) So, again in the way of deceived wives everywhere, she hoped and then prayed the affair would blow over. Until the day she overheard him talking about their new life together . . .

From that moment on, revenge was all that consumed her. Revenge on the woman who had destroyed her life. Revenge on the man who discarded her.

"The marble bust might look like the instrument of a crime of passion, a spur-of-the-moment decision, grabbing the first object to hand," Marie-Claude said as they paused to watch the churning waters of the millrace merge with the stately river. "But equally it smacked of a squeamish reluctance to be facing the victim."

A uniquely feminine approach to murder. As was the cold-blooded planning.

"It was easy enough to get a set of her husband's keys cut."

"One of the locksmiths confirmed it straightaway, but as evidence it was still far from conclusive."

"No, but it all mounted up." She kicked the fallen leaves as she walked. Alder, willow, and poplar. "Madame Baret's mistake was planting the desk key in Martine's pocket."

Good heavens, women as elegant as Madame Montaud don't use pockets! They tuck such things away tidily in their Chanel handbags, which meant someone had used that key to get into her desk and replaced it in a hurry. And if it wasn't to take something out, then it must be to put something in.

A quick check of the keys proved that the letter had been typed on the Barets' private typewriter, not in the office at the Domaine, but it had been a clever move on Madame Baret's part. If the head

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of a cognac house wanted rid of their cellar master, this would not be made public knowledge. A gentleman's agreement between the two parties, however bitter underneath, would not show on the surface. Both had too much invested in the business to jeopardise their reputations.

"She was smart about fingerprints, too."

Taking care the only ones lifted were her husband's, and who would think anything odd about seeing a lady of quality going round in evening gloves?

Whatever excuse she'd used to lure Madame Montaud down to the cellars, she must have thought it was her lucky day when Martine agreed so easily. But then, of course, she didn't know she was setting a trap for the wrong woman.

"Too smart about the fingerprints," Luc said. They had stopped to watch one of the wooden, flat-bottomed *gabarres* pass through the lock, laden with casks lashed with ropes. "That was one of the things that bothered me from the outset. That if Martine Montaud was exerting so much passion in the cellar master's quarters, why weren't hers there, too?"

"She misjudged the calibre of Madame Montaud's jewellery, as well."

How cold must her heart have been as she stood over the corpse, unscrewing the emerald cluster? Extracting the key from Martine's handbag, placing the letter of dismissal in her desk, replacing the key in Martine's pocket, then walking out as if nothing had happened, secure in the knowledge that her husband would not plead *crime passionel.* Why should he, after all? The man was innocent.

"Never mind Madame Baret," Luc said. "Just tell me whether we want that job in Paris."

Marie-Claude watched the *gabarre* sail round the bend and disappear from sight. Above, the sun shone through the falling leaves and blackbirds foraged in the litter. Next week *Dial M for Murder* would be running back to back with *Rear Window* and in subtitles, plus she still hadn't finished those curtains for the bathroom, the cellar really needed a new blind, the old one was a disgrace, the bedroom could use fresh wallpaper, ditto the salon now she came to think about it, and she'd promised Madame Garreau two more days a week with the winter collection.

"Maybe when the rains come," Marie-Claude said slowly.

Besides, she wasn't sure Luc was quite ready to live alone yet. ●

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SUFFER

by J.A. Konrath

"I want you to kill my wife."

The man sitting across from me, Lyle Tibbits, stared into my eyes like a dog stares at the steak you're eating. He was mid to late thirties, a few inches taller than my six feet, wearing jeans and a button-down shirt that pinched his thick wrists.

I sipped some coffee and asked why he wanted his wife dead.

"Do you care?" he asked.

I shrugged. "No. As long as I get paid."

Lyle smiled, exposing gray smoker's teeth.

"I didn't think it mattered. When I called you, I heard you did anything for money."

I rubbed my nose. My nostrils were sore from all the coke I'd been snorting lately, and I'd been getting nosebleeds.

"Any particular way you want it done?"

He looked around Maxie's Coffee Shop—his choice for the meeting place—and leaned forward on his forearms, causing the table to shift and the cheap silverware to rattle.

"You break into my house, discover her home alone, then rape and kill her."

Jaded as I was, this made me raise an eyebrow.

"Rape her?"

"The husband is always a suspect when the wife dies. Either he did it, or he hired someone to do it. The rape will throw the police off. Plus, I figured, with your condition, you won't care about leaving evidence."

He made a point of glancing at my bald head.

"Who gave you my number?" I asked.

"I don't want to say."

I thought about the Glock nestled between my belt and my spine, knew I could get him to tell me if I needed to. We were on Damon and Diversey in Wicker Park, which wasn't the nicest part of

J.A. Konrath's first fiction publication was in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in 2004 and by 2005 he'd won second place in the *EQMM* Readers Award. The newcomer's talent was also recognized with Anthony and Macavity nominations for his debut novel *Whiskey Sour*, which gives a role to Phineas Troutt, protagonist of this story and a character in the forthcoming novel *Rusty Nail*.

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Chicago. I could follow him out of the diner and put the hurt to him right there on the sidewalk, and chances were good we'd be ignored.

But truth be told, I didn't really care where he got my number, or that he knew I was dying of cancer. I was out of money, which meant I was out of cocaine. The line I'd done earlier was wearing off, and the pain would return soon.

"I get half up-front, half when it's done. The heat will be on you after the job, and you won't have a chance to get the money to me. So you'll put the second half in a locker at the train station, hide the key someplace public, and then give me the info when I'm done. Call from a pay phone so the number isn't traced. You screw with me, and I'll find you."

"You can trust me."

Like your wife trusts you? I thought. Instead I said, "How would you like me to do it?"

"Messy. The messier the better. I want her to suffer, and suffer for a long time."

"You've obviously been living in marital bliss."

"You have to hurt her, or else we don't have a deal."

I made a show of thinking it over, even though I'd already made my decision. I assumed this was a way to cash in on life insurance, but what life-insurance policy paid extra for torture and rape?

"You have the money on you?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Pass it under the table."

He hesitated. "Trust goes both ways, you know."

"I could just walk away."

Like hell I could. I needed a snort worse than Wimpy needed his daily hamburger. But I'm a pretty decent bluffer.

Lyle handed me the paper bag he'd brought with him. I set it on the booth next to me and peeked inside. The cash was rubber-banded in stacks of tens and twenties. I stuck my fingers in and did a quick count.

Six grand, to take a human life.

Not bad for a few hours' work.

"When?" I asked.

"Tomorrow night, after ten. I'll be out, and she'll be home alone. I'll leave the front door open for you. I'm at 3626 North Christiana, off of Addison. Remember, rape and pain."

He seemed to be waiting for a reply so I said, "Sure."

"And Mr. Troutt . . ." Lyle smiled again, flashing gray. "Have fun with it."

After the diner meeting, I called my dealer and scored enough coke to keep me high for a while. I also bought some tequila and refilled my codeine prescription.

Back at my ratty apartment, Earl and I had a party.

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Earl is what I call the tumor growing on my pancreas. Giving my killer a name makes it a little easier to deal with. Each day, Earl eats a little more of my body. Each day, I try to prevent Earl from doing that. There's chemo, and radiation, and occasional surgery. And in the off-times, there's illegal drugs, pharmaceuticals, and alcohol.

Earl was winning.

Luckily, being a drug abuser has some excellent side benefits, such as not caring about anything, erasing all emotion, and helping to forget the past.

Just a few months ago I had a well-paying job in the suburbs, a beautiful fiancée, and a life most would be envious of. Earl changed all that. Now, not even the roaches in my tenement building were envious of me.

I drank, and popped, and snorted, until the pain was gone. Until reality was gone. Until consciousness was gone.

Earl woke me up the next morning, gnawing at my left side with jagged, rabid teeth.

I peeled myself from the floor, stripped off the jeans and underwear I'd soiled, and climbed into a shower slick with mildew. I turned the water as hot as it would go, and the first blast came out rusty and stung my eyes. I had no soap, so I used shampoo to scrub my body. I didn't eat well, if I remembered to eat at all, and I could count the ribs on my hairless chest. I made a note to eat something today. Who would hire a thug that weighed ninety pounds?

After the shower I found some fresh jeans and a white T-shirt. I did a line, choked down three painkillers, and dug out an old Chicago phone book.

"Walker Insurance."

"I had a couple questions about life insurance."

"I'll transfer you to one of our agents."

I took my cell over to the fridge and listened to a Muzak version of Guns N' Roses while rummaging through the icebox. Nothing in there but frost.

"This is Brad, can I help you?"

"I'm thinking of taking out a life-insurance policy on my wife. We live in a nice neighborhood, but she has this unrealistic fear—call it a phobia—of being raped and killed. I'm sure that would never happen, but do you have policies that cover that?"

"Accidental death includes murder, but not suicide."

"And rape?"

"Well, I've heard of some countries like India and Africa that offer rape insurance, but there's nothing like that in the U.S. But if she's afraid of being attacked, a good life-insurance policy can help bring some peace of mind."

"What if she doesn't like the idea of insurance? Could I insure her without her knowing it?"

"For certain types of insurance, the person covered doesn't need

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to sign the policy. You can insure anyone you want. Would you like to schedule an appointment to talk about this further?"

I thought about asking him if he covered people dying of cancer, but I resisted and hung up. My next call was to the 26th District of the Chicago Police Department.

"Daniels."

"Hi, Jack. It's Phineas Troutt."

"Haven't seen you at the pool hall lately. What's up?"

"I need a favor. I'm looking for paper on a guy named Lyle Tibbits."

"And I should help you because?"

"Because you're a friend. And because he owes me money. And because I probably won't live to see Christmas."

Jack arrested me a few years back, but she'd been cool about it, and we had an on-again-off-again eight-ball game on Monday nights. I'd missed a few lately, too stoned to leave my apartment. But I'd helped Jack out a few times, and she owed me, and she knew it.

"Let's see what Mr. Computer has to say. Lyle Tibbits. Prior arrest for— It looks like trafficking kiddie porn. Did a nickel's worth at Joliet. Paroled last year."

"Anything about a wife or kids?"

"Nope."

"Address?"

"Roscoe Village, on Belmont."

She gave me the numbers, and I wrote them down.

"Nothing on Addison?"

"Nope."

"Can you give me his vitals?"

Jack ran through his birth date, Social Security number, mother's maiden name, and some other choice info cops are privy to.

"You coming this Monday?" she asked when the litany ended. "I finally bought my own cue."

"A Balabushka?"

"A custom stick on my salary? More like Wal-Mart."

"I'll try to make it. Thanks, Jack."

"Take care, Phin."

I tucked the Glock into my pants, pocketed my set of master keys and a pair of S & W handcuffs, and hit the street. It was cool for July, in the low seventies, the sun screened by clouds or smog or both. I grabbed some sweet-and-sour chicken at a local shop, and then spent an hour at a place on Cermak filling out paperwork. When I finished, I hopped in a cab and took it to Roscoe Village.

Lyle's apartment had a security door, which I opened on the fourth try. One of my first acts as a criminal had been to rob a locksmith, earning me a set of sixty master keys. They opened ninety percent of the locks in the U.S. It was much easier than learning how to use picks and tension wrenches, which is something I didn't have the time to learn anyway.

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The halls were empty, befitting midday. I found Lyle's apartment number and knocked twice, holding my pistol behind my back.

No answer.

I got through his door on the second try, set the security chain so no one could pop in on me, and began my search.

In the living room were six double DVD recorders, all of which seemed to be running. In a box next to the TV were a hundred plastic clamshell boxes, and a spindle of blank recordable DVD-Rs. In the corner of the room were three digital camcorders and a PC. I powered up the computer, spent ten minutes trying to get his password, then gave up and turned it off.

The kitchen revealed a smorgasbord of junk food—he had enough sugar in here to put an elephant into a diabetic coma. On the counter, next to the phone, was a receipt for a glazier, the total more than five hundred bucks. Stuck to the fridge with a banana-shaped magnet was a picture of Lyle drinking a beer. I put the picture in my pocket.

In the bedroom, I found an extensive collection of porno DVDs. Bondage, watersports, S/M, and even a kink new to me: latex vacuum mummification. All legal.

I found his illegal stuff in a padlocked trunk, in the back of the bedroom closet. The lock opened with the seventh key I tried.

Child porn. Movies with titles like *See Billy Cry* and *Maxie's Birthday Surprise.* Some of the covers had pictures.

I tried not to look.

There were also a few other illegal movies, along with a bag full of cash. Over twenty grand.

I took the money, locked the trunk back up, and left the apartment.

Satisfied that I knew who I was dealing with, I bided my time until ten P.M. Then I could finish the job.

As promised, Lyle had left the door open for me.

The house was dark and quiet, just like the neighborhood. I walked down Christiana and up the porch stairs without encountering a soul. Once inside, I locked the door behind me and held my breath, listening for sounds of life.

Nothing.

The lights were on in the living room, and I held my Glock before me and did a quick search of the first floor. The furnishings leaned towards the feminine side: pink drapes and flower patterns on the couch. On the end table, copies of *Glamour* and *Cosmo.* In the kitchen, a half-eaten container of lowfat yogurt sat on the counter, a spoon alongside it. I checked the back door, found it locked, and then crept over to the staircase.

The stairs were carpeted, but they squeaked with my weight. I paused after every two steps, ears open. I didn't hear a damn thing.

The second floor revealed an empty bathroom, an empty guest

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room, and a bedroom.

The bedroom was occupied.

A woman was tied to the bed, naked. She was white, late twenties, her blond hair tangled up in the red leather ball gag buckled around her mouth. Leather straps around her ankles and wrists twisted around the four bedposts. Her eyes were wide with terror, and she screamed when she saw me, the sound lost in her throat.

There was a note next to her head.

Give it to her. And leave the gag in, or she'll wake the neighbors.

The room was unusually well-lit. Besides the ceiling light, there were lamps on either side of the bed, one in the corner next to the mirrored closet, and an extra work-light—the portable kind that clips to things—attached to the bed canopy.

"Hello," I said to the woman.

She screamed again.

"Shh. I'll be with you in just a minute."

I took two steps backwards, toward the closet, and then spun around, facing the mirrored sliding door. My free hand pulled back the handle while my business hand jammed the Glock into the closet, into the chest of Lyle Tibbits.

Lyle yelped, dropping the camcorder and trying to push me away. I brought the gun up and clipped him in the teeth with the butt.

He fell forward, spitting blood and enamel. I gave him another chop on the back of the head, and he ate the floor.

"Don'tkillmedon'tkillme!"

I put my foot on his neck and applied some weight, glancing back to check the rest of the closet. Empty. The mirror was one-way, and I could see the bed through the door's glass. The original mirror rested against the rear wall.

"Who is she, Lyle?"

He yelled something, the carpet muffling his words. I eased up some of the pressure from my foot.

"I just met her last week!"

"She's not your wife."

"No! She's just some chick I'm dating!"

"And you hired me to rape and kill her so you could videotape it. I saw the other films back at your apartment. Does snuff sell for more than kiddie porn?"

Lyle wiggled, trying to crane his neck around to look at me.

"It's worth a fortune! I'll cut you in, man! It's enough money for both of us!"

I glanced at the woman tied up on the bed.

"How much money?" I asked.

"I've got over half a mil in advance orders! We'll be rich, man!"

"That's a lot of money, Lyle. But I'm not greedy. I don't need that much."

"How much do you want? Name the price!"

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"You're worth eighty grand to me."

"Eighty grand? No problem! I can—"

I knelt on his back, cutting off his breath. Pressing the Glock to the back of his head, I yanked the handcuffs out of my pocket.

"Put your left hand behind your back, Lyle."

He complied. I yanked his arm back in a submission hold, slapped on the cuffs, then climbed off.

"Let's go into the bathroom, Lyle."

I was a bit too eager helping him to his feet, because I hyperextended his arm and felt it snap at the elbow.

Lyle howled loud enough to hurt my ears, and I gave his broken arm a twist and told him to shut the hell up. In the bathroom, I chained him to the drainage pipe under the sink, then I went back into the bedroom.

"You're safe," I told the woman. "No one can hurt you now. I'm going to call the police. Are you okay to talk to them?"

She nodded, frantic. I took off her gag.

"He was gonna kill me."

"I know." I picked up the phone next to the bedside and dialed 911, then placed it on the bed next to her mouth.

I walked out of the room as she began talking.

I was in a drugged haze when Jack called on my cell.

"Missed you on Monday."

"Sorry. Been busy."

"Remember that guy you called me about? Lyle Tibbits? He got picked up a few days ago."

"Is that a fact?"

"It seems as if Mr. Tibbits was planning on making a snuff film, but someone came and rescued the snuffee."

I wiped some blood off my nose. "Sounds like she got lucky."

"She said it was a bald man."

"Poor guy. It's tough being bald. Society discriminates."

"It would help the case if this mysterious bald man came forward and testified."

"If I see him, I'll let him know. But you probably don't need him. If you check out Lyle's apartment, you might find plenty of reasons to lock him up for good."

"We did that already. Mr. Tibbits will be eligible for parole when he's four hundred years old."

"So why the call?"

"The woman who was saved wants to thank her hero. In person."

An image flashed through my head of Linda, my fiancée. I'd left her because I didn't want her to see me suffer and die.

No one should be subjected to that. To me.

"That's not possible," I told Jack.

"I'll let her know. Pool Monday?"

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"I'll try to make it. Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"They holding Tibbits over at Cook County?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"General population?"

"I think so. He's in for kidnapping and attempted murder. The state's attorney is putting together the illegal-porn case."

"Thanks, Jack."

I staggered to the bathroom and rinsed the blood and powder off my face. Then I threw on some clothes, left my apartment, and staggered to the corner news vendor. The daily paper set me back a buck. I sat on the curb and read the police blotter until I found what I needed. Then I picked up three cartons of Marlboros and took a cab to Cook County Jail on 26th and California.

I spent two hours waiting before I was able to see Jerome Johnston. He was black, twenty-two years old, a member of the Gangsta Disciples. Jerome was being held for first-degree murder.

"Who the hell are you, cracker?" he said upon meeting me in the visitation room.

"I've got a deal for you, Jerome. A good deal." I handed him the three cartons of smokes that the guards had already searched. "This is for your valuable time."

"What do you want?"

"There's a white boy in your division. Name of Lyle Tibbits. He's a baby raper. Likes to have sex with five-year-old boys and girls." I stared hard into Jerome's lifeless eyes. "I want you to spread the word. Anyone who takes care of him will get twenty cartons of cigarettes. He'll be an easy mark—he's got a broken arm. Here's a picture."

I handed him the photo I'd taken from Lyle's apartment.

"How do you know me?" Jerome asked.

"I don't. Just read about your drive-by in the paper. Thought you'd be the right man for the job. Are you, Jerome?"

Jerome looked at the picture, then back at me. "Hell yeah, dawg."

"One more thing. It can't happen until tomorrow. Okay?"

"I'm straight."

I left the jail and cabbed it back home. In my room I did more coke, ate some codeine, and stared at the eighty-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy I'd taken out on Lyle Tibbits, which would become effective tonight at midnight.

Eighty grand would buy a lot of pain relief. It might even be enough to help me forget.

I drank until I couldn't feel Earl anymore, and then I drank some more.

When Monday rolled around I cashed my policy and met Jack at Joe's Pool Hall and whipped her butt with my new thousand-dollar Balabushka custom-made pool cue. ●

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COLLECTIVE NOUN FOR BLACKMAILERS

by Stephen Ross

It happened two years ago at ten o'clock in the morning.

(1) A guy walked into a bar.

(2) He tossed some nuts into his mouth.

(3) He pulled out a gun.

(4) He shot the solitary drinker seated at the end of the bar.

(5) He strolled out again.

The case became known as the Eats, Shoots, and Leaves Murder. It was one of the less noteworthy cases of 1950.

No one knew the dead man and no one got a good look at the shooter. The bar was not in the kind of neighborhood where people took notice of those who came and went. In fact, in that neighborhood, people went out of their way *not* to notice.

The bartender had never seen the dead man before that morning. The dead man was drinking gin, and apart from asking for the gin, he hadn't said a word.

The bartender had seen the shooter come in, but he was busy answering the phone in the office at the time and he didn't pay any attention.

There were no clues, apart from some nuts on the floor. The bullet passed clean through the man's neck and lodged in the jukebox on the back wall—number one with a bullet, like they say. The slug was from a .45 and the nuts were roasted.

The bartender was grilled. His name was Merkon. He owned the

Stephen Ross makes his living as a data-systems programmer for an IT company, but he has worked as both an English teacher and a technical writer, and he has a passion for music that has found an outlet in scores he's composed for theater, a couple of short films, and a TV documentary. For the past couple of years, however, fiction-writing has been his consuming interest.

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bar and had bad breath. The phone call he was answering had been from the young woman he employed mornings as a waitress. She was an hour late and had called in sick.

The waitress was also grilled. Her name was Nancy. She wasn't sick. She had spent the night arguing with her boyfriend and didn't feel like working that day. The boyfriend was spoken to. His name was Bruno, he was a saxophone player—he had a bruise on his forehead where a dinner plate had hit him.

The dead man was about fifty-five. He was of medium build, had tidy hair, and was clean-shaven. He was dressed in a near-new suit and his shoes had recently been shined. There was nothing unusual about him except for his right eye—it was made of glass.

The dead man had no personal identification on him. He had a wallet—inside were two quarters and a dime. He had smoked, wore aftershave, and his fingernails were immaculate. In sum total, he was not the kind of guy you'd expect to find dead in that neighborhood.

The old man who had shined the shoes was located two days later, six blocks away. The old man didn't know the face in the morgue photo, but he recognized the shoes; he'd shined them the morning of the shooting. Imported. Good-quality leather. The dead man's English had been broken. He had had an accent. He had seemed impatient and he didn't tip.

The killer was never identified and neither was the dead man—they couldn't even trace the glass eye, although it was probably of European origin. The case had never been closed.

Anderson leaned back in his chair. The look on his face was one of bemusement. "So, why are you telling me all this, Wilson? This was two years ago. I wasn't even the editor here then."

Wilson stubbed his cigarette out. "I'm telling you all this because Nancy Stillwater's photo just made page seven of today's edition."

"Nancy? The waitress?"

Wilson nodded. "She had an accident. She backed over a poodle coming out of her driveway. The poodle belonged to the sister of the mayor."

"Mayor Guthrie's sister?"

"Yes."

"She's the sister with the six Picassos and the house up in the hills?"

"The very one."

"Wrong lady's poodle to flatten."

Wilson nodded. "And she's suing."

Anderson echoed the nod. "I've no doubt."

Wilson dropped a newspaper onto Anderson's desk. It was opened out at page seven. "Nancy was photographed coming out of court. It seems Nancy and the mayor's sister are neighbors. This is

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not the first time they've had trouble."

Anderson stared at the picture. Even in black-and-white, Nancy Stillwater looked like the kind of woman his heart surgeon had warned him about—tall, cool, blond, dressed in a fur, with a look on her face suggesting she owned, if not the world, at least you.

Anderson grew skeptical. "Just how does a two-dollar waitress get to live in the same street as the mayor's sister?"

"Nancy owns the house next-door," Wilson explained. "It has eight bedrooms, and there's a tennis court out in the back."

There was a stunned look on Anderson's face. "Did she come into money?"

Wilson nodded. "Two years ago, Nancy Stillwater lived in a one-room above an appliance store."

"Okay, I see your point," Anderson said. "Investigate it."

Wilson smiled.

"But I want receipts this time."

Wilson Hills was a short, punchy little man. Barely five-four in height, he had a round face and a cheerful smile. He always wore the same tie—lime green, with stripes—and favored a loose-fitting suit.

Nancy Stillwater and the mayor's sister lived up in the hills on Delshaw Drive. It was the kind of street where nobody cut his or her own lawn, and every other house had a swimming pool. And if you didn't have a pool, you had a tennis court.

Wilson parked his car at the curb. Nancy's house was white stucco. It had two floors and balconies. There was casualness to its design, as if it was something Frank Lloyd Wright might have sketched up on a sunny afternoon over coffee and witty repartee.

The front door was open—wide open. Wilson rang the bell and stepped inside.

The interior of the house was Art Deco. The floor tiles were white. There was a sweeping staircase—to the left of which stood the statue of a woman. The woman was silver, taller than Wilson, and wearing an expression of unobtainable demureness.

"Hello?" Wilson yelled. His voice echoed in the entranceway.

No one was answering the door, not even a maid.

"Nancy Stillwater?"

The house was devoid of life. The faint hum of air conditioning purred in the background.

Wilson followed a hallway leading to what looked like a living room. The walls of the hallway were lined with photographs of Nancy. Some photographer had decided Nancy was a work of art, or she had paid one to make her think that.

It was a living room. There was an acrid smell in the air. It hung. There was a palm tree in the corner of the room. A grand piano stood in another corner, an acre of framed photos stood on

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top of its closed lid.

At the center of the room was a wooden area large enough for a tango—of a very fine dark wood. Polished. The furniture surrounding it was all white. Plush. Seating for thirty.

The acrid smell was gunpowder. Nancy was dead on the dance floor. Someone had shot her in the head. The furniture was ruined.

Wilson looked for the telephone. The gunpowder smelled recent. He noticed there were nuts on the dark wood of the dance floor. He took a closer look. There were a handful of them. Roasted.

Wilson found the telephone. He hadn't even put his hand to it when he heard the sirens. He figured the neighbors must have heard the gunshot. Maybe the mayor's sister had put in the call?

Within a minute, Nancy's living room took on the appearance of a police convention. Uniformed officers were everywhere. They were taking bets on the type of gun used. They were huddled about in groups picking over last night's fights. They were using the dirt at the base of the palm as an ashtray. Two were playing a duet of "Chopsticks" on the grand.

Lieutenant Harden, a sour-faced dump truck of a man in possession of few facial features and dressed in a black overcoat, knew Wilson. Knew him and hated him. And when he walked in and laid eyes on him, he wished the first officers who had arrived on the scene had shot him dead.

Harden hated reporters, especially short ones who poked their noses where they shouldn't ought to.

"How's the wife, Harden?" Wilson inquired as the dump truck approached.

"You're under arrest," Harden grunted at Wilson.

"Why?"

"Why not? There's a dead girl lying on the floor and you have no alibi."

"You haven't even asked for an alibi."

"Do you have one?"

Wilson shook his head. "How about a motive? I don't have one of those, either."

"Book him," Harden grunted at the nearest uniform who wasn't preoccupied.

Wilson protested, but he was firmly escorted from the building and out to a waiting patrol car.

Before Wilson got in, he remembered he had forgotten his hat. He excused himself to retrieve it.

The officer waited.

Wilson went out the back, around the pool, and over the wall. The last time Wilson had ever worn a hat had been during the war.

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Sitting in a police cell would not be working—it would be sitting. Wilson hadn't shot Nancy, so he saw no reason for loafing on the job.

The bar was in a back street off an alley. The bar had two claims to fame: the Eats, Shoots, and Leaves Murder, and the fact that Rudolph Valentino drank there once.

Wilson was an instinctive reporter, and his instincts told him if you want to know the story, start at the beginning. The bar was the beginning of this story. Everything began there, so there he went.

The place was empty. The jukebox still had the bullet hole in it. Behind the bar was a young redhead with her hair done up in a bun. She was smoking a cigarette and reading *Time* magazine—Lucy was on the cover.

"Is the owner about?" Wilson asked.

"Mr. Rutherford is on holiday," the woman replied, glancing over the top of the magazine.

"Rutherford?" Wilson asked. "I thought the owner's name was Merkon."

"Mr. Rutherford became the owner after the death of Mr. Merkon."

"Merkon died?"

The redhead nodded.

"Let me confirm, Merkon was the owner here when the Eats, Shoots, and Leaves Murder took place?"

The redhead nodded again.

Wilson frowned.

"Mr. Merkon was shot too," she added. "Only they didn't give it a fancy name."

"Merkon was shot?"

The woman behind the bar nodded. "Six months ago. Five bullets. His body was found by the city dump."

Wilson ordered a whiskey. He climbed up onto a barstool and got to know the redhead better.

The woman's name was Sophie. She had been working at the bar for eight months. She knew all about the Eats, Shoots, and Leaves Murder.

Merkon had told her all about it. Merkon had told *everyone* all about it. But, it was what he *hadn't* been telling everyone about the murder that really fascinated the redhead.

"He called it his retirement fund," Sophie reported. "He showed it to me. He kept it hidden. It was a little candy box. It had a tartan design to it, only what was inside probably wasn't candy, and probably not Scottish."

"What *was* inside?" Wilson asked.

"He never told me. But it had something to do with that murder, and he said it was going to make him a rich man."

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"Where's the box now?"

Sophie shrugged her shoulders. "I've looked for it, but I've never found it."

Wilson would have left the matter there, finished his drink and gone on his way, were it not for Sophie's next remark: "You know, there was a guy in here just last week asking the same questions as you."

"What guy?"

"A middle-aged guy. He smoked cheroots. I don't know I would trust him if I had to. I told him about the candy box, too. He took a great interest in it."

Wilson stared at the redhead. She had blue eyes. Sophie was a nice name for a redhead with blue eyes. Wilson could sit in that bar a whole long time, he imagined.

"Did I say something?" Sophie asked. She noticed a sparkle in the short man's eyes.

Right around then, a police cruiser pulled up outside the bar. Within seconds, two thickset police officers came into the bar with their guns drawn.

Wilson went out the back door—it was next to the jukebox. He slipped through the doorway like a rabbit down a hole. A hail of gunfire went after him. Half of the bullets went into the jukebox, and the other half went through the doorway and narrowly missed him. One didn't—it nicked his cheek.

So, Merkon had been shot dead—six months ago. Merkon's passing had passed Wilson by unnoticed, so he headed to the morgue to catch up.

The morgue was in the basement of the *City Daily Herald.* Every issue the newspaper had ever printed was archived there, along with every report file, photograph, mimeograph, memorandum, and shopping list anyone in the building had ever written, filed, or sneezed upon.

Wilson had to wait until well after dark before he went in, and only then entering through a seldom-used back door. If the police had followed him to the bar with such apparent ease, then they'd have certainly staked out his office up on the fourth floor.

Once downstairs in the morgue, Wilson waded his way through the dusty back editions, rolling back the days about six months.

It was dark and damp down in the basement. The morgue was really no better than a rat-infested warren of corridors and shelves, lit by two five-watt light bulbs. The word "dank" had been coined there.

Merkon's death barely got more than a paragraph and was buried toward the back of a late edition under a story about combine harvesters.

Wilson read about Merkon by the light of his cigarette lighter. It

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was pithy: Merkon was a man, he was found dead at the dump, and police had no leads in the investigation.

Wilson went for the back files—maybe there was more in the reporter's notes. But there was no file on Merkon. Nary a slip of paper.

Wilson dug deeper. There weren't any files on Merkon's bar, and none for the shooting there, either. The reporter's notes on that alone surely would have been an inch thick—Wilson knew this, he wrote much of it.

And there were no files whatsoever on Nancy Stillwater. Not even confetti.

Wilson lit a cigarette and pondered. Files were what a newspaper was built on. Documentation was the lifeblood of journalism.

Wilson could hear footsteps—slow, deliberate steps. They drew near.

"What are you doing?" asked a voice in the darkness. The voice had an English accent.

In the dim wattage of the lighting, Wilson could make out the peering eyes of a man with a Victorian moustache.

"I'm looking for back files," Wilson explained. "Marvin Merkon and Nancy Stillwater."

The man came further into the light. He was a polite-looking man, with a touch of gray about his hair. He looked like the type of man who'd wear a smoking jacket of an evening.

He looked like the type of man who, at this time of night, should be at home in his parlor poring over a copy of Dickens rather than hauling around a bunch of dusty documents in the basement of the *Herald.*

"I have all those files here," the man reported, tapping the papers he was holding. "And you shouldn't smoke down here. It's rather dangerous with all this paperwork around."

"Who are you?" Wilson asked.

"James Filbert, copyeditor. Who are you?"

"Wilson Hills, reporter."

Filbert led Wilson back to the morgue's entrance—at the foot of the stairs by the bottom of the elevator shaft.

Filbert explained to Wilson that the police had asked to see all the files pertaining to the Merkon murder and Nancy Stillwater. Filbert had spent two hours rounding up all the files, and no, Wilson could not look at them. They were to be handed to the police forthwith.

Wilson stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray. Something dawned on him. "Are you Filbert? I mean, are you *the* Filbert?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're the copyeditor who came up with the Eats, Shoots, and Leaves Murder headline?"

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Filbert looked a bit miffed. "That was my headline, what of it?"

"We're still laughing about it on the fourth floor, that's what of it." Wilson's grin suggested the laughter on the fourth floor wasn't because they thought it was funny.

"Writing headlines is hardly writing Shakespeare," Filbert sniffed. He spied blood on Wilson's cheek. "Why are you bleeding?"

"Something wicked my way came. Nice to meet you, Filbert."

Wilson made his way up the stairs back to the street. When he got to the top, he turned around and stepped back down to the basement. Since when was the newspaper handing over its archives to the police for their perusal?

When Wilson got back to the foot of the stairs he could hear Filbert before he could see him. Filbert was talking on the basement telephone. He was talking to the police. He was telling them that the fugitive they had been looking for was leaving the building, and if they wanted to catch him, they'd better hurry.

Wilson was about to get the hell out of there when Filbert did a curious thing. After he hung up the telephone, he put a cheroot to his lips, struck a match, and lit it up. After seeing this, Wilson got the hell out of there.

It was approaching midnight. Wilson headed to the bus terminal. He had a key to locker 221. He had a feeling he might need the contents of locker 221.

Wilson hadn't got but three steps inside the terminal when a tall, beefy man in a brown suit grabbed him by the shoulder, turned him around, and walked him back out again.

The beefy man walked Wilson across to a car—a black sedan. Its engine was running.

The beefy man tossed Wilson into the passenger's seat as if he were an overcoat. He then walked around the car and got in himself.

Once behind the wheel, the big guy flicked on the headlamps, put the car into gear, and drove away.

"And you would be Bruno," Wilson said, winding down the window.

"How you know my name?" Bruno asked, negotiating the traffic.

"I'm a reporter."

"Is that what you do?"

Wilson noticed that Bruno had lips the size and shape of a prizefighter's fingers, and chin stubble like a porcupine.

"Yeah, that's what I do," Wilson said. "You're Nancy Stillwater's boyfriend."

They drove across town, until there were no more oncoming car headlamps and the street lighting had faded to nonexistent.

Bruno parked the black sedan out in the back of a run-down and dilapidated building. There was a sign by the back entrance:

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STAGE DOOR. It was held up by one remaining hinge.

Bruno flicked a switch on the fuse box. The lights came on. He walked Wilson out onto the stage of what had once been a rather splendid old theater, but had long fallen into decline.

There were some dusty decorations strewn about which suggested the last show the room had seen was a USO party eight years back—New Year's, 1944.

"I got this place cheap," Bruno explained. "I'm going to get in some people and fix it up."

"I take it you didn't bring me here to discuss the decorating," Wilson replied.

Bruno dug his hand into his suit pocket. He pulled his hand out again and tossed a fistful of nuts into the air above his head. When the nuts came back down again, some went into his mouth, the rest landed on the wooden floor of the stage and scattered across it.

"Why'd you shoot Nancy?" Bruno asked, chomping on a mouthful of nuts.

"I didn't shoot Nancy," Wilson answered. "Are you sure you didn't?"

Bruno shook his head. "Why would I shoot Nancy? Nancy was my wife."

Wilson smiled politely. "That might not stand up in court."

"I went out for beer," Bruno explained. "When I come back, I see you being led out of my house by the police. I see Nancy being carried out on a stretcher—with her head covered."

"I didn't shoot Nancy," Wilson said. "I'm a reporter. I only come into the picture after something's happened."

"Is that what you do?"

"Yeah, that's what I do. Anyway, what's with you and Nancy? Two years ago you were blowing a saxophone in a strip joint and she was a waitress. Nancy now owns a house up on Delshaw and you've gone into property investment."

Bruno put his hand into his other pocket—only it wasn't roasted nuts that he kept in that one.

Wilson stared down the unforgiving barrel of an M-1911.

"Do you sing?" Bruno asked.

"Do you have a request?"

"I like to sing. People tell me I have a beautiful voice."

"You have a beautiful voice."

"I wanted lessons when I was a kid, but my mother made me learn an instrument."

"You have a beautiful voice. Want to point that .45 at someone else?"

"Nancy was my brain," Bruno explained. "She thought of everything. I just played the part."

"What was the picture?"

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Bruno blankly stared at Wilson. Analogy and metaphor may as well have been types of pasta.

"What part did you play when you were playing your part?" Wilson asked.

"Nancy was an attractive woman," Bruno explained. "All kind of guys was attracted to her."

"Rich guys?"

"Yeah, rich guys. Rich guys with money."

"How did it get to be your money?"

"They'd take Nancy out. They'd show her a good time."

Wilson nodded knowingly. "And she'd show them an even better time."

Bruno had that blank look again.

"We'll put her down as a gracious hostess."

"They had a good time," Bruno said again, stiffly, on the verge of getting the point.

"So, how did you fit into it?" Wilson asked.

"I'd play the jealous husband."

Wilson nodded. "Got it."

"I'd show up, mess the guy up a bit. Pull a few buttons off his shirt."

"And then you'd blackmail them?"

"Nancy would have them pay her money."

"How much money?"

"A lot of money. She'd tell them I'd killed a man. She'd tell them I'd caught her fooling around once before."

"So, why were they giving her money?"

"She told them she was going to hire a man with a gun. The man was going to take care of me."

"Blackmail with a twist." Wilson grinned. "And let me guess, after they'd paid her the money, something would go wrong."

Bruno nodded. "How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess."

"Nancy would telephone them a few days later. She'd tell them I had found out all about it. She'd tell them I had killed the man with the gun. She'd then say I had shot her and she was dying, and now I was coming after them and they ought to run."

"And they left town by sundown."

"Yeah."

Wilson nodded. "Okay, so why then did you shoot dead the guy with the glass eye in Merkon's bar?"

Bruno didn't like that question.

A gunshot rang out. It echoed inside the theater like thunder. Bruno fell to his knees and clutched his stomach. He was bleeding. He'd been shot from behind and the bullet had gone right through him. A second later he flopped to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

There was another gunshot. This one was aimed at Wilson. Wil-

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son could feel it slice the air next to his head as he leaped from the stage.

Three more shots chased Wilson as he sprinted up the aisle of the theater towards the entrance. Several divisions of both the German and Italian armies had failed at putting a bullet into Wilson, and he had no desire to change his batting average now.

Back at the bus terminal, Wilson slid his key into locker 221. He needed its contents now more than ever. He opened the locker and pulled out a rolled-up newspaper.

Wilson went to the men's room and locked himself in a stall. He unrolled the newspaper and pulled out an old war buddy—his Colt semiautomatic.

Wilson tucked the pistol into his inner jacket pocket.

Wilson's apartment building was staked out. Two police officers dressed in long coats and reading newspapers stood on the steps by the front door of the building and pretended not to be police officers.

There'd be others inside for sure. In the hallway, on the roof, and probably a couple of them waiting right inside his living room—playing poker and eating his leftovers.

Wilson was starting to get annoyed. They were his leftovers and he was hungry.

"Are they police officers?" a voice asked him quietly.

Wilson nearly jumped out of his skin. He thought he had been alone standing in the darkness of the alley across the street from his building.

"Those guys on the steps?" It was the redhead from the bar. She had somehow managed to sneak up on Wilson without making a single sound.

"Yes, they're cops."

"I thought they might be," Sophie said. "They're only pretending to read those newspapers."

"What are you doing here?" Wilson asked, seeing Sophie's eyes in a sliver of moonlight.

"I was looking for you."

"How did you know where I lived?"

"You're in the telephone directory," Sophie reported.

"Why are you looking for me?"

"I found the candy box."

Sophie's room was above an all-night drugstore. Red light flicked on and off outside her open window—vertical neon letters:

T
O
R
E

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Sophie flicked on the ceiling light. She pointed Wilson in the direction of the dining table.

Sophie's room was small, but tidy—a single bed, a couple of chairs. Her dining table had a surface area equivalent to that of a chessboard. On top of it lay a small candy box—tartan-patterned.

"It was inside the jukebox," Sophie explained. "It fell out when those cops put a bunch of holes in it trying to shoot at you."

"Music to my ears." Wilson grinned. "Do you know why they were trying to shoot me?"

"Yeah, they said you shot a woman."

"Do you believe them?"

"I don't know, you seem okay to me."

Wilson pulled the lid off the candy box. Inside the box was a passport. Wilson flicked the passport open.

The photograph inside the passport was of the dead man with the glass eye. The dead man's name was apparently Paul Johnson. He was an American citizen, born in Akron, Ohio, in 1896.

"Mr. Merkon must have taken this off the dead man right after he was shot," Sophie supposed. "And then he didn't show it to the police."

"Merkon wanted to play his own game," Wilson said. "By the way, the woman I'm supposed to have shot was your predecessor, Nancy Stillwater."

"I heard," Sophie said.

Two cars pulled up outside with abrupt screeches of tires.

Wilson went over to the open window. Two police cruisers were parked in the street below—six large cops were climbing out. The cops were brutish-looking, hairy, fat Neanderthals of law enforcement. Two of them had to lift their hands to stop them dragging on the ground.

"The police are getting awfully serious," Wilson remarked, pondering the sight below.

"They must have followed us," Sophie said, flicking off the light. "They must have seen us across from your building."

"Should I run or just throw them some bananas?"

Sophie decided for both of them. She led Wilson down the stairs from the second floor.

When they got to the first floor they didn't stop, they kept on going and went down into the basement.

Sophie muttered something about a laundry and adjoining cellars. Wilson couldn't make out the exact words, but by the time the cops had gotten to the stairs leading up to Sophie's room, he and Sophie were coming up the stairs in the neighboring building—directly into Mr. Song's laundry service.

Mr. Song was pleased to see young Sophie. Her clothes were ready anytime she wanted to collect them. Wilson stopped and made brief inquiries about having some pants turned up at the leg.

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By the time the cops burst their way into Sophie's room, she and Wilson were coming out into the pitch-black alley behind the neighboring building.

They marched briskly. A handful of stars above were about the only light in the alley.

"Did the guy asking questions at the bar last week have a big old-fashioned moustache?" Wilson asked.

"Yes, he did," Sophie replied.

"His name is Filbert, he works at the newspaper. I ran into him earlier this evening."

They got out of the alley and onto a cross street. They had planned to head back to the bar. But they hadn't walked more than a block before the black sedan pulled up at the curb next to them and the familiar sight of a barrel of a .45 was pointed in their direction.

Bruno was apparently not dead.

"Do you ever do anything in life where you don't point a gun at someone's head?" Wilson snapped at Bruno.

Bruno was not dead, but he was rapidly running out of blood and growing paler by the minute. With his gun pointed in their direction, he drove them back to his theater. He parked out the back, and then gun-pointed them back inside.

"If all the world's a stage, why am I back on this particular one?" Wilson moaned, clomping his way across the wooden boards to the center of the stage again.

"Shakespeare?" Sophie inquired, right behind him.

"Kind of."

"Who's Shakespeare?" Bruno asked, trying to point the gun at both of them.

"Nobody special," Wilson commented.

"Did he shoot Nancy?"

Sophie shook her head. "Shakespeare didn't shoot anybody. He's been dead for hundreds of years."

Bruno nodded knowingly. "Somebody got him, huh?"

The three of them stood in the center of the stage, with Bruno aiming his gun in their general direction, with his other hand holding a clump of blood-soaked cloth to his chest.

"This place could do with a good clean," Sophie griped, glancing about the theater.

"So, what's going on, big guy?" Wilson asked. "I haven't seen you for a while."

"Who's the broad?" Bruno asked, pointing his nose at Sophie.

"She works at the bar where you shot Paul Johnson."

"That man's name wasn't Paul Johnson," Bruno reported.

"I figured that," Wilson replied. "I have his passport in my pocket. It's counterfeit."

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Bruno stared at Wilson with suspicion.

"A year ago I worked a story that broke a counterfeit-passport ring," Wilson explained. "I know what to look for."

"Did the broad shoot Nancy?" Bruno asked, pointing his nose at Sophie again.

"The *broad* has a name," Sophie sniffed. "Point your nose at someone else, lump-head."

"She didn't shoot anybody," Wilson argued.

"Give me a gun and we'll see about that," Sophie snapped.

"What's the broad doing here?" Bruno asked.

"I'm waiting for Mr. Right and some chocolates, lump-head."

"You brought her here," Wilson pointed out. "Think about it, Bruno. Whoever shot Nancy probably also shot you."

Bruno frowned. He remembered he was bleeding. "Who killed us?"

Wilson smirked. "How about Nancy's old boss, Merkon?"

"Merkon's dead," Bruno helpfully pointed out.

"Merkon was blackmailing you, wasn't he?"

"Yeah."

"So you shot him."

Bruno shook his head.

"After you shot the man with the glass eye in his bar, Merkon went through his pockets. He found the man's passport. He knew who pulled the trigger, so he blackmailed you, and then you shot him."

"Yeah, Merkon was blackmailing us, but I didn't shoot him," Bruno said. "Nancy did."

"Score one for Nancy," Wilson replied. "Was the glass-eyed man one of your jealous-husband targets?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you shoot him?"

"He was blackmailing us."

"Him too? How?"

"Nancy found out something about him," Bruno explained. "Something big from his past. Nancy took him for thousands of dollars. Much more than the jealous-husband routine."

"What was his secret?"

Bruno wasn't answering that. He was as white as a bed sheet.

"So, what gave?"

Bruno frowned. "He had pictures, lots of them—photographs of Nancy and me. He said he'd post them to the newspaper. Nancy didn't want that."

"Why not?"

"There's a lot of guys around town who think Nancy's dead on account of me being a jealous husband."

"I see the problem."

Bruno shook his head. "Nancy set it up. The guy was to wait for her in the bar. There was never anyone in there at that time of morning. Nancy telephoned to say she wasn't working. Merkon

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was in the office speaking to her on the telephone. I walked in and shot the guy. But then I forgot to do something."

Wilson shook his head. "What do you mean, forgot?"

Bruno frowned regretfully. It was a sad expression. "I was supposed to leave the gun behind. I was supposed to hide it under a table."

"Why?" Wilson asked.

"It was Merkon's gun. Nancy lifted it the night before."

"You were wearing gloves."

Bruno nodded dolefully.

"You were going to frame Merkon."

Bruno nodded.

"Well, ain't you the smart one," Sophie chirped, lighting up a cigarette.

"So," Wilson asked. "Who *was* the dead man with the glass eye and the fake passport, and what was his big secret?"

Bruno looked as if he was about to say something meaningful, but he finally ran out of blood. He hit the floor of the stage like a sack of potatoes that had gone rotten.

Wilson frowned. "I don't think he'll be getting back up again for the third act."

The sun was coming up.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?" Sophie asked, winding down the window of Bruno's black sedan. "Everybody's blackmailing everybody."

Wilson changed gears. He smiled. "I know exactly what's going on. I just need to make a phone call to confirm it."

The telephone on Lieutenant Harden's desk rang. Harden put down a mug of black breakfast coffee and grabbed it up with his fat hand. "What?"

A few minutes later Wilson put the receiver down. He was back in the bar.

"Now I need you to make a call," Wilson said.

Sophie nodded.

The three bears were looking at each other. They looked rather like three elderly gentlemen who had repaired to the garden after breakfast. If they could have talked, they'd have probably discussed the weather—a glorious morning—or the latest zoo gossip, or the stock exchange.

Sophie leaned over the guardrail and stared at them.

"Do you know what the collective noun for a group of bears is?" Wilson asked. He leaned over the guardrail alongside her.

"No," Sophie replied.

"A sleuth of bears."

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Sophie smiled. "Why did you become a reporter, Wilson?"

Wilson smiled back. "They wouldn't let me join the police force."

"Why not?"

"I'm too short."

Sophie nodded. She could see that; she herself had four inches on Wilson.

At ten o'clock exactly, Sophie was standing alone at the guardrail of the bear pit—as planned. She nervously glanced about. She could hear the chiming of the zoo clock back at the front gate.

Before the tenth chime had sounded, a man walked into view and headed towards her. The man was holding an umbrella under his arm.

The man stepped up alongside Sophie, leaned against the guardrail, and then dropped the cheroot he was smoking to the ground. He stepped on it with his shoe and ground it out.

"Where's the box?" James Filbert asked.

"Why did you want to meet me here?" Sophie asked.

Filbert looked about. "Because there's no one here, and because I like the zoo at this time of the day."

Filbert pulled out his wallet and peeled out a bill. "Here's the twenty I promised."

Sophie took the twenty. She pulled the tartan-patterned candy box out of the grocery store bag she'd been holding.

"I appreciate your help," Filbert said, taking the box. "I have a fairly good idea of what's inside this."

Filbert opened the box. He stared at the contents with bemusement. "Although I wasn't expecting that," he said, gaping at a picture of Lucille Ball.

"It's from the cover of this week's *Time* magazine," Sophie pointed out.

Filbert screwed up his face in anger. "What's this all about?"

"It's all about this," Wilson barked, walking toward them holding up the Paul Johnson passport.

Filbert was even more confused. "What are you doing here, Hills?"

"I like the zoo at this time of the day," Wilson replied. "And I was over there hiding in the bushes waiting for you to arrive."

Filbert pulled a pistol out of his pocket. He pointed it at Wilson. "Give me the passport."

Wilson pulled his own gun out. "No."

Sophie backed away. Filbert aimed his gun at her head. "Give me the passport or I'll shoot her."

Sophie froze.

"The police didn't want those files from the morgue, like you told me," Wilson said.

"How do you know that?" Filbert asked, trying to look at Wilson while aiming at Sophie.

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"I asked them," Wilson replied, the barrel of his own gun aimed squarely at a point between Filbert's eyes. "You were blackmailing Nancy."

Filbert didn't deny it. "What of it?"

"Why did you shoot her?"

"A successful blackmailer knows when to stop." Filbert smiled. "Nancy was an amateur. She milked Max Braun for every penny he could lay his hands on. She milked him until he was absolutely dry, and look where it got her."

"I'm figuring Max Braun was the real name of the man with the glass eye?" Wilson asked.

"Yes, it was," Filbert replied. "He was a Nazi spy, did you know that, Mr. Reporter?"

"No, I didn't."

"He came here in the last year of the war. He was an undercover agent, sent to infiltrate. The name in that passport, I think you'll find, is Paul Johnson."

"Correct."

"When the war ended, Braun found himself out of a job, and stuck in a very dangerous place should he be found out."

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Sophie asked.

"Go right ahead," Filbert said. He stared at Wilson. "Nancy's been getting into trouble lately—she could never stay out of it. I made a good deal of money out of her. I chose to quit while I was ahead."

Something dawned on Wilson. "You have the photographs!"

Filbert grinned.

"Max Braun had photos of Nancy and Bruno," Wilson said. "He was going to send them to the newspaper."

Filbert nodded. "They arrived the week he got shot. They were addressed to the editor. Providence saw to my opening the mail that morning."

"So, you knew what was going on."

"Max Braun wrote a lovely letter. The photographs were very flattering."

"So you shot Nancy, and then you shot Bruno," Wilson said.

"Yes," Filbert answered. "You see, one of the roles of a copyeditor is to tidy things up. To strip out all the unnecessary parts."

"You're hiding all of the evidence."

Filbert nodded. "Indeed." He then sighed. "Poor Bruno, I always felt sorry for him. He was always the last to know anything."

At that precise moment, Sophie's cigarette hit the spot between Filbert's eyes where Wilson's gun had been aiming. It was an expert flick.

Filbert immediately got a face full of cigarette ash. Hot ash went into his eyes and into his mouth.

Right after that, Wilson hurled his gun at Filbert's head. It whacked him hard. So hard, Filbert stumbled backwards, tripped

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over the umbrella he was carrying, and upended himself over the guardrail and fell down into the bear pit. He fired every bullet he had on the way down.

Before Filbert even landed, a herd of police officers lead by Lieutenant Harden charged onto the scene from out of the bushes Wilson had been hiding in earlier.

"What in heaven's name did you do that for?" Harden barked like an indignant walrus as he galloped in Wilson's direction.

The three bears played with Filbert as if he were a new toy on Christmas morning—and he lasted about as long as one.

Wilson frowned. "I see bears actually do eat more than shoots and leaves."

Wilson bought Sophie a milkshake. He carefully stored the receipt in his pocket, and together he and Sophie strolled back toward the zoo's entrance.

"Have you had that gun all along?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," Wilson replied, lighting a cigarette.

Sophie slurped on her milkshake and looked at him. "Why didn't you use it last night when Bruno was holding us at gunpoint?"

"I don't have any bullets."

Sophie stopped walking and slurped the last drops of the shake. She watched Wilson walk away. The midmorning sun was shining above him.

"Hey, Wilson?" she shouted after him. "Want to buy a girl a *real* drink?" ●

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Bad Blood

by Keith McCarthy

Here's an author *CSI* fans will adore. Keith McCarthy is a pathologist who has chosen the same trade for his fictional hero, John Eisenmenger. In Mr. McCarthy's novels—of which there are four in the series to date: *A Feast of Carrion, The Silent Sleep of the Dying, The Final Analysis,* and *A World Full of Weeping* (all Carroll & Graf in the U.S.)—Eisenmenger works alongside DI Beverley Wharton, who appears in this story.

It was raining and it was cold. The man with the tape measure, the camera, and the clipboard was grumpy because his pen wouldn't work properly and there was water dripping off his hat down the back of his neck.

"Tell me why I'm here, Kocher."

Beverley Wharton looked as if she had fallen amongst lepers.

Sergeant Kocher grunted and abandoned his attempts to write. Without a word he walked out into the centre of the road, knowing he was safe because police cars blocked both ends. Despite the rain, the incidents of the night had still managed to attract six of the more rubber-necked citizens of the city; the audience was considerably augmented by faces peering from the sitting-room windows of the houses that lined both sides of the street. Beverley followed him to a point in the middle of the road. It was surrounded by plastic police cones joined into an approximate square by yellow tape. The rain had not been heavy enough to obliterate all the blood from the tarmac.

"The hit-and-run happened at approximately eight fifty-five. The victim was a young female, identified by credit cards and organ donor card in her handbag as Elizabeth Sanderson."

"Is she dead?"

"Not yet."

"So what's it to do with me?" This was a uniform matter. Not that anybody ever openly admitted that uniform matters were less important than those of plain clothes, at least not to the poor spacks in uniform.

Once more Sergeant Kocher didn't get around to replying directly. He walked up the road, away from the bloodstain, his

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torch pointed directly down on the surface. As Beverley followed him, a train rumbled past in the distance. The rain seemed to get slightly heavier and far more uncomfortable. He stopped walking about twenty metres away from the coned-off area and looked at her.

She asked, "Well?"

It was his show and he knew it. That she should have failed to spot the evidence was a source of pleasure to him, irritation to her. He said, "I've been up and down this street. The only skid marks are inside the toilets."

At last she understood. "Deliberate, you mean?"

"Without a doubt."

Now she was interested. "Witnesses?"

He shook his head, a sour grin on his face. Indicating their audience both inside and outside, he said, "Believe it or not, none."

"Where's she been taken?"

"St. Benjamin's."

Having organised house-to-house enquiries in the street, she arranged to meet DC Rich at the hospital.

"It's potentially attempted murder, okay?"

He nodded and said nothing. She liked that about him; when he spoke it was usually worth the effort of listening. If she said that it was attempted murder then, as far as he was concerned, that's what it was. She asked, "Where is she?"

"Intensive care."

She didn't voice her feelings as he led her through the starkly lit corridors, past occasional abandoned beds and wheelchairs. They ignored the sign on the door that requested them to ring and wait and walked straight in. The warmth stifled them at once.

They were ignored at first, allowing Beverley to look around. She counted eight beds, six of which were occupied, all flanked by stacks of equipment. There was a background cacophony of electronic beeping, an amelodic composition that never repeated yet was depressingly familiar. Beverley murmured something under her breath. Rich asked, "Beg pardon, ma'am?"

Her eyes were bright, her expression one almost of anxiety as she continued to look around the room. "I hate places like this. There's death here, but no dignity."

Besides the patients, there were about ten people in the room, some of them at the desk in the centre of the far wall, others around the occupied beds. All were dressed in blues; all, to Beverley's eye, were steeped in sanctimonious dedication. It was as if they were priests and priestesses scurrying around the temple.

At last one of them—a young blond woman—noticed them and frowned at their presumption in invading the sanctum. Rich saw

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her, too, and smiled. Beverley saw that there was more than politeness in his expression and found a twinge of jealousy.

"Can I help you?" She was attractive, Beverley had to admit, and she knew that Rich liked blondes, but there was also a ring on her finger.

Rich said easily, "Police. I'm DC Rich, this is DI Wharton. We're here about an RTA victim. Elizabeth Sanderson."

At once there was a shift; from wary disinterest came forth sorrow. She indicated the bed in the corner to their right. "Liz is over there."

Beverley asked, "Liz?"

The woman—her name badge told them that she was Sister Hamman—said, "Liz Sanderson, yes."

"You know her?"

"She works here. She's a doctor—a specialist in one of the medical departments."

Rich made a note of this; Beverley considered the information, then decided that it was a coincidence of little likely import. She asked, "Can we speak to her?"

Sister Hamman shook her head regretfully. "She's intubated and sedated. She's in a bad way, too."

"How bad?"

"Broken pelvis, flail chest, hairline skull fracture, and broken femur; possible lung lacerations. She'll be going to theatre later tonight, assuming we can stabilise her."

"So when will we be able to talk with her?"

Sister Hamman sighed and said seriously, "If she makes it at all, not for days."

Beverley had hoped for better but was philosophical. "Next of kin?"

"Parents live in Spain; they're on their way over."

"Husband? Boyfriend?"

"She's single. I don't think she was seeing anyone in particular."

"You've got a home address for her?"

She went to the nursing notes and scribbled it down on a Post-it note. As she handed it to Beverley she said, "Until a few months ago she was going out with someone."

"Name?"

"Mark Strauss. He's a gynecologist here."

"And where does he live?"

She shrugged. "Switchboard would know," she suggested. Beverley glanced at Rich, who nodded slightly; he would find it out for them. To Hamman she said, "Thanks. We'll keep in contact."

Beverley began to walk out, with Rich following her. A porter came in, went up to the desk, and asked Sister Hamman, "You got something for the Path Lab?"

She handed him two clear plastic bags in which there were sev-

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eral tubes of blood and request forms; the tubes were capped in a variety of colours. "Took your time, didn't you?"

The porter smiled slyly. "Busy night." He left whistling jauntily.

Outside, Rich asked, "Where does she live?"

"Vineyard Street. If she lives alone, we'll have to wait before we can get in there. Why don't you ring the switchboard and get Strauss's address? At least we should be able to get some background, if nothing else."

Strauss had taken the news of the hit-and-run badly, and had appeared to be devastated when Beverley suggested that perhaps it had not been an accident. He sat now in his chair, looking pallid and even, Beverley thought, shaking slightly. When they arrived he had been drinking wine and scribbling notes on a paper pad—"Writing a chapter for a textbook"—and he had by now nearly finished the bottle. He was tall, with a wide mouth and bright blue eyes.

"What was she like?"

He hesitated, searching for the words. "Pretty, bright, happy."

She ignored the begging of the question at the back of her mind. "I understand that you're no longer seeing each other."

"No."

"Why not?"

The question nonplussed him. "Well . . . " He shrugged. "We weren't getting on."

She raised her eyebrows. "In what way?"

"Oh . . . we were bickering a lot. Anyway we were finding it difficult to get much time together."

She smiled at him, noting that his hands were fidgeting; he didn't like answering these questions. "Bickering? Or arguing?"

He stared at her. "What do you mean?"

Rich had stopped taking notes and was looking at him. She explained, "I mean, how violently did you argue?"

Once more he hesitated, but this time because of indignation. "What's that got to do with anything? Are you suggesting that I did it?"

If he hoped for mollification, he got only implacability. "Out of interest, what were your movements this evening?"

"Now, look here . . . "

She said tiredly, "Calm down, Mr. Strauss. Nobody's interested in you if you didn't do it, but there are questions I need to ask you."

He calmed down slightly. Rich asked, "What time did you get home?"

"Seven, I think."

"What then?"

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"I had a sandwich, then started on this. I've been doing this all evening."

"Nobody saw you?"

"No." He looked suitably worried. "Is that a problem?"

Beverley's face was neutral as she assured him blandly, "I shouldn't think so." Before he could look too relieved, she enquired, "So. Was it arguing, or bickering?"

"It was *disagreement,* okay? It was two people who weren't quite so much in love anymore. We decided that we weren't destined for each other."

"And that's it?"

"I didn't hit her, if that's what you mean."

The interview went on for an hour. They built up a picture of a young woman who had apparently been a hard-working junior doctor; overworked and under stress.

"Her colleagues all liked her?"

"Absolutely. No one had a bad word for Liz."

Rich's question was almost flippant. "What about her patients? Were they all completely happy?"

Strauss took the question with unexpected seriousness. "You mean Mr. Ascherson, I suppose."

Did he? Beverley said at once, "That's right."

Strauss sighed. "Look, Liz made a ghastly mistake, that's all. It could happen to any of us. She was tired, it was late at night, and there were two other sick patients on the ward. To this day she doesn't know how she mixed the bloods up."

Still ignorant of what he was talking about, Beverley said nothing and let him fill the space.

"Liz went through hell about it. She was suspended by the Trust, there were extensive investigations that were practically a witch hunt; it was awful. And then, to cap it all, the GMC have taken this whole thing out of proportion, charging her with gross negligence."

"But Mr. Ascherson was upset . . ."

"Wouldn't you be? His wife had died of a transfusion reaction because of Liz's mistake." He laughed sourly. "Yes, he was upset."

"Did he threaten her?"

He shook his head. "No, not with violence, anyway. He's not the type."

They moved on to other matters—her family, her background, her habits—then were on the point of leaving when Strauss said suddenly, "Waterhouse!"

"Waterhouse?"

He was animated now. "He's a porter at the hospital. Weaselly sort of chap. He threatened her."

"Why?"

"His wife was a nursing auxiliary at the hospital. She stole some

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money from Liz. Liz found out and made a fuss about it. The woman was sacked."

"And her husband threatened violence?"

"He threatened to kill her."

A radio message when they got back to the car told them that perhaps he had kept his promise; Elizabeth Sanderson had died from her injuries.

Philip Waterhouse might have been designed by a protocol to be the killer. Although only twenty-seven, he had four convictions for violence, including seven months' imprisonment for assault. He had several cautions for joyriding, and had tried his hand at social-security fraud.

"A charmer," was Rich's dry conclusion as they drove to Waterhouse's flat next morning. It wasn't a chintz-and-charm neighbourhood; low-rise blocks of concrete flats separated by tatty grass strips and old, rusting cars. Perhaps half of the windows around them were boarded. The atmosphere was one of hard hostility. It was the kind of area that the fire brigade didn't want to know existed and that taxi drivers avoided after dark.

"With a grudge, perhaps."

Waterhouse had had educational difficulties, leaving school at fifteen without anything to show for it, not even proficient in cycling. He had had a broken home, been fostered at the age of nine and then sexually abused by both of his foster parents, who had subsequently been convicted on seventeen counts.

Waterhouse answered their knock after a long delay, clearly woken from sleep. It was with some shock that they recognised the porter who had been in Intensive Care the night before. From his expression, he, too, had recognised them.

Beverley didn't waste any time. "We're here about Elizabeth Sanderson."

"What about her?"

The room was cold and untidy and small. Baby's things cluttered the floor and there was an odour of soiled nappies. Beverley wondered where the wife and child were.

"She died last night."

"So?"

"We're treating it as murder, and you are known to have threatened her."

His attitude suggested insouciance, but Beverley saw concern in his small eyes as he said, "So I killed her? All I said was that I would get even with her."

"What did she do?"

"She got my wife sacked."

"Your wife stole some money from her."

"So she said, but she's a liar. Look around—we're not rich—we

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needed that money. She's got a job cleaning but she's working her guts out and it's a lot less than she was getting as a nurse."

"But if she stole money . . ."

He said at once, "Sally's no thief. Sanderson lost the money, or maybe someone else stole it."

"You are a thief, though, aren't you?"

His defence of his wife faltered, then he rallied. "What's that got to do with it?"

"A thief; a violent thief."

"I'm not a murderer."

Beverley smiled. "So you say." Then, "The fact remains that you *did* threaten to kill Elizabeth Sanderson and now she's dead."

"And it wasn't me."

"Where were you last night?"

"At work. You saw me."

"What time did you start?"

"Nine."

Beverley smiled. "Plenty of time. Elizabeth Sanderson was run down at about eight. Where were you before you went to work?"

"Here, babysitting. Sally doesn't get in from work until eight-thirty."

"You were alone?"

"No. The baby was here."

Strangely no one laughed. Beverley asked, "You've got a car?"

"It's got four wheels but I don't reckon Michael Schumacher would rate it."

"Where is it?"

A sleepy half-cry came from a room beyond before Waterhouse said, "Outside."

"Make? Colour?"

There was a moment of quiet, but then the crying began again, this time louder, this time more demanding, this time not ceasing. Waterhouse said sourly, "It's a white Ford Escort."

Beverley and Rich stood up. Over the noise, she said, "We'll need to take it for forensics."

Despite the crying of his baby, Waterhouse stayed seated. "And what am I supposed to do?"

She held out her hand for the key. "Take the bus. Now, are you going to cooperate, or shall we take you down to the station for questioning on suspicion of murder?"

In the street, they inspected the car.

"I can't see anything," said Rich. "Can you?"

It was covered in scratches and was rusting badly around the doors. It had probably been in several collisions, but none of them recently as far as she could tell.

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"No," she sighed. "Still, he might have got a quick body job done on it. We should get it checked out by the lab."

A woman was looking at them from across the street. She was old but still erect and apparently alert. She held her coat closed tightly across her chest. Beverley said, "I can't believe we're that interesting, can you?"

They crossed to her. Rich showed her his warrant card and Beverley asked, "Can we help you?"

The woman must have been around eighty. She said, "I saw you looking."

"And?"

She nodded at Waterhouse's flat. "Drives like a maniac, he does. 'Bout time you did something about it. Nearly knocked me down last week."

Beverley nodded sympathetically. "What about last night? Did he drive like that when he went out last night?"

"Oh yes. Woke up half the neighbourhood, he was so loud."

"And what time was that?"

The woman thought. "Just before eight. *Coronation Street* hadn't finished."

Elizabeth Sanderson's home proved barren of interest. It was untidy, but no worse than Beverley's, and Rich thought it positively exemplary. There were no letters from blackmailers, the bank statements were boring, and they found no hint that she was a drug dealer.

Rich, who had done the majority of the searching while Beverley watched, announced, "There's nothing here of use to us."

She was reading a letter that she had found in the kitchen by the bread bin. It was from the GMC. "We should speak to Ascherson."

"Why? It's obviously Waterhouse."

She stood up. "It's never obvious, Ed. Not even when they've been convicted."

Ascherson lived in quite a large house that was slightly rundown. It had a view over a golf course at the back and the road was relatively wide, but there was a faint air of neglect over the entire neighbourhood; the paint on window frames and doors was peeling, some of the gardens were overgrown. It was as if the upper middle classes had moved on elsewhere, leaving the slightly less prosperous to their fate. The Ascherson house had clearly not been painted for a long time, and there was an ugly green stain on the brickwork where a blocked gutter had been overflowing, possibly for years.

The man who answered the doorbell was small and perhaps in his sixties. He looked crushed, both because he had a slight stoop

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and because on his face was a look of total loss. He had an unhealthy, pallid look to his skin. The room into which they were ushered was cluttered with ornaments and photographs; all of the pictures were of Ascherson and a woman, clearly his wife. The pictures presented a haphazard photojournal of their lives together, with some clearly dating back forty years. The surfaces had not been dusted for many weeks.

"We couldn't have children," he said, although no question had been asked. "We only had each other."

"We'd like to talk to you about your wife's death, Mr. Ascherson."

He nodded. What else, he seemed to imply, was there to discuss?

"I understand she died because of an error on the part—"

"Negligence," he interrupted. "It was unforgivable negligence."

Beverley started again from a different tack. "Something went wrong with a blood transfusion."

He shook his head. "Nothing 'went wrong,' as you put it. The doctor gave her the wrong blood. It killed her. It was horrible. She had fits, she was in pain, moaning . . . " He had drifted back to her death, his eyes looking beyond his guests. "They took her to Intensive Care and stuck tubes in her, put her on a ventilator, but it didn't matter. She died in the night." He suddenly looked up at Beverley. "I was there." This with pride. "I stayed with her. I was there when she died. . . . "

He drifted away again, clutching his hands together. Peeping from beneath a frayed cuff, Beverley saw a crudely drawn tattoo.

She said, "And Dr. Sanderson was found to be at fault."

He nodded fiercely. "That's right. She did it. She killed my Jean."

Beverley said softly, "Dr. Sanderson died last night."

He looked directly at her. For a moment his face held something she couldn't define; possibly pleasure, possibly fear, possibly even pride. Then, "How?"

"She was run down in the middle of the road. Deliberately."

He digested this. "And you think it was me?"

"You had a motive."

"I'm suing her. Why would I want to kill her?"

"Money isn't always enough."

He nodded, as if agreeing. "I haven't got a car," he pointed out. There was a hint of slyness, Beverley thought. She let it pass.

"Mind if we look in the garage?"

He shrugged. As they walked outside she asked, "May I ask why your wife needed a blood transfusion?"

"Ulcers. She'd had 'em for years."

The garage was full, but of rubbish, not cars. They didn't spend long looking. Rich asked, "Could we ask where you were last night? Between say seven-thirty and nine?"

His reply was riddled with sour melancholy. "Watching the bloody telly. What else have I got to do now?"

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They sat in a bar not far from the station, he drinking bottled lager, she vodka and tonic.

"House to house in the street where the hit-and-run occurred has drawn a blank," he told her gloomily.

She snorted. "I bet we'd find some witnesses if it had been a live sex show."

"People don't want to get involved. It's understandable."

"People are morons, Ed. They don't deserve to be protected."

He wasn't as experienced as she was and wasn't, therefore, as cynical.

She said, "So, we have three potential killers, none with an alibi."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily. No alibi, nothing to disprove. You can't prove they're telling the truth, but you can't prove they're lying, either."

He was about to argue but she asked, "What about the autopsy?"

He had made notes which he now consulted. "The pathologist's report is pretty much as we expected—multiple fractures and extensive intra-abdominal soft-tissue injuries."

"Anything to help ID the car?"

He perked up. "There were some paint flecks embedded in the hip wound, apparently."

"Colour?"

"White."

"Enough for a make?"

He shook his head. "Probably not." When she looked disappointed he said, "Waterhouse's car is white."

"So are at least a quarter of a million others in this city alone. Anyway, I don't hold out much hope that Waterhouse's car was the one that did the deed."

"But he's got to be our number one—"

"I didn't say that Waterhouse didn't do it, merely that he didn't use his own car. He's stupid but not imbecilic."

They sipped their drinks. "What now?" he asked.

"Well, tomorrow I'm going to dig a little deeper into Mrs. Ascherson's unfortunate demise, while you're going to talk to Mrs. Waterhouse."

"You think she's involved?"

"Who knows? I don't and I want to." She remembered something else. "Second, ask around the hospital about Strauss. Reassure me that he's not the vindictive type. Third, I want you to do some background research on Mr. Ascherson."

"Why?"

She thought of the crude tattoo. "Humour me," she suggested.

There was a period of silence before Rich said softly, "And what about tonight?"

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She smiled and put her hand on his. "Sorry, Ed. Not tonight."

At the look of disappointment she whispered, "Time of the month."

"Take me through the details."

Miss Cowden looked a little disconcerted to have a police inspector in her office. She opened the file on her desk and said nervously, "Well, the incident occurred on the morning of Saturday the fourth of April. Mrs. Ascherson was admitted as an emergency because of a GI hemorrhage . . ."

"GI?"

"Gastrointestinal. She was vomiting blood."

"Thanks."

"Dr. Sanderson was on call . . ."

"How long had she been on call?"

These interruptions proved even more disconcerting for Miss Cowden. After several minutes of searching through the papers she said, "Twenty-two hours."

"Okay."

"The medical notes indicate that Mrs. Ascherson was ill but not *in extremis.* However, as per protocol, Dr. Sanderson decided to take a blood sample for a cross-match of blood. At the same time another patient, admitted that same night and with a similar condition, also needed a blood transfusion. Dr. Sanderson took the blood from both at the same time. In the course of doing that she somehow mislabelled both bottles."

"So the blood in the tube with Mrs. Ascherson's name came from the other patient."

"That's right. The lab cross-matched the blood, sent it to the ward, and it was transfused into Mrs. Ascherson. She became seriously ill very quickly. Although the transfusion was stopped, she deteriorated on the Intensive Therapy Unit and died some hours later."

"What about the other patient?"

"Mr. Peyer was fortunate in not actually receiving his units of blood. As soon as the potential problem was appreciated, they were sent back to the lab."

"And what happened then?"

"As per procedure, this was reported as an Adverse Clinical Incident—graded red for highest priority—and we, the Clinical Governance and Risk Management Department, began an investigation. It soon became apparent what had happened—the laboratory checked the samples again; following that, Dr. Sanderson was suspended from duty."

Beverley considered this. Eventually she asked, "Did you interview all the staff involved?"

"Oh yes."

It all sounded very plausible to Beverley and, in truth, she

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couldn't actually see why it shouldn't have been just a terrible, terrible accident. "Tell me, did Dr. Sanderson admit liability?"

"She was adamant that she hadn't made a mistake, but, of course, the evidence . . ."

"Could I see that report?" Miss Cowden looked as if she were about to refuse when Beverley added, "This is a murder investigation, you appreciate."

Miss Cowden relented.

And over the next thirty minutes, as she read, Beverley became very, very intrigued.

By the time she arrived back at the station, Ed Rich looked about to explode.

"At last!" he said.

"Got something?" She sat at her desk. "What about Mrs. Waterhouse?"

"She's out of the picture. She was at work until eight and then took the bus home. She can't even drive. No, it's Ascherson who's interesting."

She raised her eyebrows. "I thought he might be."

"He's not quite the respectable citizen we thought."

Beverley had never thought he was particularly respectable but she let it pass. "What's he done?"

"Multiple counts of child abuse."

"He served time?"

"So did Jean Ascherson. She was up to it as well." He pushed a file across her desk, which she picked up.

"How long ago?" she asked.

"He was sentenced to seven years, she to four. She got out two years ago, but he's only just been released."

She began reading the file. After a while she leaned back. "Anything on Strauss?"

"He hasn't got a reputation for violence, but by all accounts the bust-up with Elizabeth Sanderson was pretty explosive. Big row in the canteen, apparently."

"I still don't see him as a killer."

"No alibi, though."

"Mmm . . ." Suddenly she fished in her pocket and produced a plastic carrier bag wrapped around something. Handing it to Rich, she said, "I nearly forgot. Get these to forensics, will you? I didn't have an evidence bag, so don't touch."

"What are they?"

She was reading intently and he nearly missed what she said. "Evidence of a second murder."

Two hours later, Beverley took a phone call, listened for perhaps

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ten seconds, then put down the phone. She walked out of her office, called across to Rich. "Come on, Ed."

He had been typing at his computer console. It took him a moment to save and close the file, then he stood up, taking his coat from the rack on the wall by his desk.

"Where are we going?"

"To arrest a murderer or two."

Ascherson looked no better, possibly worse. His skin seemed now to have the quality of parchment, something taken from a sarcophagus.

"May we come in, Mr. Ascherson? We need to talk."

He eyed her warily from eyes that might have been faintly yellowed. Without a word he stood aside. They resumed their places of a day before.

"You've only recently been released from prison."

If he was surprised by this he concealed it completely; he nodded. "How did you know?"

She indicated his arm. "The amateur tattoo."

He covered it up as if embarrassed.

"Released early," she went on and once more he nodded.

She took a deep breath before asking, "How long have you got?"

He didn't hesitate. "They won't say. It's gone to my liver. Maybe weeks, maybe months."

She nodded. "Not long enough to sue the hospital for the death of your wife."

He shook his head. He looked at her intently but his expression was unmoving. There was a long pause in which the silence became thick, old, cloying. At last Beverley asked, "Whose car did you use?"

For the first time he dropped his gaze. "It was just an old banger. I bought it for cash that afternoon."

"And where is it now?"

"We own a lock-up garage about a mile from here. It's in there."

She pursed her lips and said, "We'll have to take you in. You'll be charged with murder."

He didn't shrug, just smiled. "You think I care?"

She didn't want to tell him but had to. As they were walking out to the car, he in Rich's handcuffs, between them, she said quietly, "You were wrong, you know. Elizabeth Sanderson was innocent."

He stopped, stunned. "What do you mean?"

"She had nothing to do with the death of your wife. Nothing at all."

"No . . ."

"We're going to arrest the guilty party now."

It was the cruelest thing she had ever done. He didn't want to believe her, but was terrified he would have to.

They went first to the station, where Ascherson was formally

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charged, then left again, this time for the hospital. They found their quarry in the canteen.

"Hello, Philip."

He was eating a flaccid sandwich that was damp and overstuffed with ketchup, mayonnaise, and some sort of artificial meat. Just looking at it made Rich feel ill. "Have you finished with my car?"

Beverley sat down opposite him, Rich to his side. "Oh yes. We're quite satisfied that it wasn't the car involved in the death of Elizabeth Sanderson."

"'Bout time." He ducked his head into the sandwich, came out again with a full and ugly mouth.

Beverley leaned back in her chair, perhaps to keep her distance from the sight. "You won't be needing it, though."

He ceased to chew. "What do you mean?" This through semi-masticated food.

"You won't be needing it. Not inside."

He started chewing again but it was clear there was no longer much flavour. Only when he had swallowed did he ask, "Inside?"

She smiled and moved her head just once up and down. "That's right. Inside. For the murder of Jean Ascherson."

For a moment he didn't speak, his eyes eloquent as they flicked from Beverley to Rich and back. Then, "What are you talking about?"

"You murdered Jean Ascherson."

"No, I . . ."

"You murdered Jean Ascherson because she and her husband fostered you and whilst you were in their care they sexually abused you."

"No . . ."

"I've looked at the files, Philip. You'd made accusations against them early on, but no one believed you then. By the time the authorities caught on and realised you were telling the truth, your criminal record meant that they couldn't use you as a witness; they had enough anyway."

"You got no proof. . . ."

Suddenly Beverley looked around the canteen. "How did you get a job here?" she asked. "Did you lie about your record?" Before he could answer she resumed her story. "They went to prison but then, quite unexpectedly, they walked back into your life. Jean Ascherson was admitted with a hemorrhage, while you were on duty as a porter."

He shook his head, his sandwich thankfully forgotten.

"And Dr. Sanderson took some blood for a cross-match. Dr. Sanderson who had got your wife the sack. You were the porter who took the samples to the lab, weren't you? And while you were doing it, you had a brain wave. A single stone to kill two birds."

He was wide-eyed now, very afraid.

"How did you do it, Philip?" She wasn't actually interested in his

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answer. "I would guess that you took two empty but otherwise identical blood bottles, emptied Mrs. Ascherson's into one, Mr. Peyer's into the other, then washed the originals out with sterile water, and poured the samples back in. Only you swapped them over." She smiled. "Almost the perfect murder. Mrs. Ascherson dies of a transfusion reaction, Dr. Sanderson is accused of gross negligence."

"No . . ."

"What did you think when Elizabeth Sanderson was knocked down? Pleased or disappointed?"

For a moment he seemed about to break, then abruptly he said, "Prove it."

She looked at him, apparently giving this challenge due consideration for a while. Then, sweetly, she said, "I have the records that you were the porter who took the samples to the path lab. From the records, it took forty minutes for the samples to leave the ward and arrive in the laboratory. A long time, especially as it only takes ten minutes to walk it."

"I came here, for a cup of tea."

"Really? Tut, tut. Those samples were urgent."

He shrugged.

She sighed, then stood up. "Come on. Let's go."

"Where?"

"To the police station. To charge you with Jean Ascherson's murder."

He didn't believe her and remained seated. "You can't prove anything . . ."

She swooped down on him suddenly, her face a few centimetres from his. "Yes, I can, Philip. They've kept the blood samples, you see. It's a medico-legal case, so they keep everything. And I've had the bottles dusted for prints. Do you know what I found, Philip? Your fingerprints. They were in plastic bags, so why would you have to handle them?"

It took him a moment. "I dropped them accidentally. I had to pick them up."

"What, all of them? From both bags?"

A nod.

Her smile was broad. "Nice try, Philip, but your prints weren't on all of them. They weren't on the other blood samples from Mr. Peyer and Mrs. Ascherson, only on the samples taken for cross-matching."

Before he could say anything more she said, "You know, I could almost forgive you for what you did, except that you might have killed someone who was entirely innocent. That's unforgivable, Philip."

He shook his head.

For a moment all three of them remained still. Then Beverley nodded at Rich and he took Waterhouse's arm. ●

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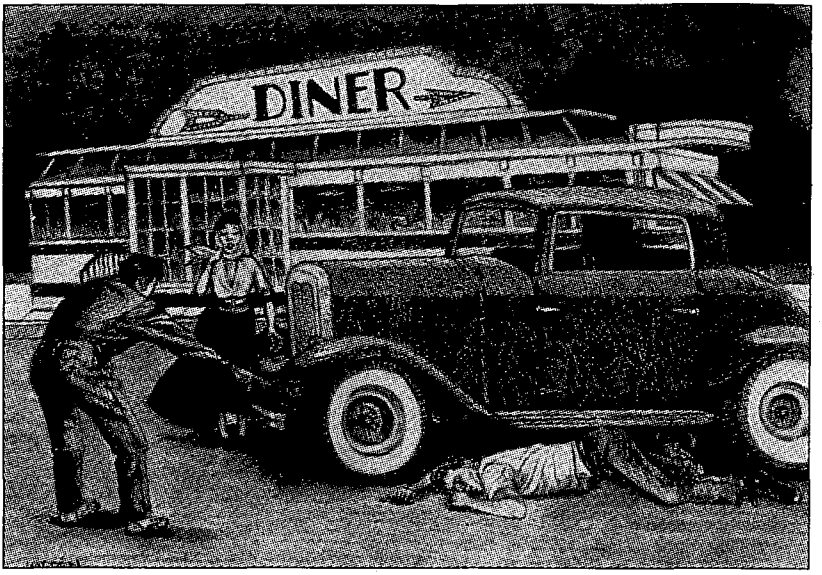

Art by Laurie Harden

FRAMED

by James H. Cobb

The little man in the cheap blue suit crouched in the dark under the sycamore tree, fingering the gun in his pocket. The roadside diner was located on an isolated stretch of Indiana State 22 and the only light he had to fear issued from its glowing strip of windows. It glinted off the chrome and glass of the scattered cars in the graveled parking lot. The little man gathered himself to move. . . .

It had been the 1948 season opener at the Gas City dirt track, and I had killed the universe.

I'd won my four-lap trophy dash, picking up the trophy, the five-buck pot, and a kiss from the cute cheerleader doing duty as trophy girl. I'd nailed a second in my heat race, blowing Nick Tompkins and his lead sled '34 out of the water. And I'd run solid in the big twenty-lap final.

I never had any real chance in that one. A street rod like mine just couldn't run against dedicated racing roadsters. The A-bomb and I started in the middle of the pack and we stayed there, but

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we'd had a lot of fun doing it. I also had the consolation of knowing that everything finishing ahead of me had come in on a trailer or a tow-bar.

Afterwards, our usual crowd descended on the checkerboard-tiled environs of the Route 22 diner. Martin Luther Snustaad and Johnny Roy Tardell were there, and Lee Curtis and his girlfriend Estelle Archer. A station-wagon load of teenaged Fairmont females had shown up as well, running in a pack to avoid trouble while hoping they'd still get into some anyway. Between standing for Cokes and malts and keeping the jukebox primed, my five bucks' worth of trophy money didn't last long.

James Cobb writes both science fiction and mystery fiction. Science fiction fans know him as the author of the Amanda Garrett techno-thriller series from G.P. Putnam, and more recently for "The First Cup of Coffee War" in the Joe Haldeman anthology *Future Weapons*. In the crime field, the Tacoma author has one published novel, *West on 66* (St. Martin's), which features the protagonist of this new story, Kevin Pulaski.

As for me, man, I was a violent collision between Duke Nalon and Juan Fangio with an order of Clark Gable on the side. I was wearing my genuine Navy surplus ponyhide jacket and my genuine Army surplus silk aviator's scarf and I'd been careful not to smear the oily dust I'd accumulated on my face so you could see the outline of my driving goggles. Given the giggles and glances being cut in my direction from the ponytailed and poodle-skirted gang in the back booth, I, Kevin no-middle-initial Pulaski, was destined for greatness that night.

Then Lee and Estelle said they'd be heading home early.

Yeah, sure, tell me another one, guys. It was one of our first really good springtime parking nights outside—starry, clear, and just cool enough to encourage cuddling.

Lee was a fellow hot rodder, a tall, lanky, slightly homely farm boy who met all of the qualifications for "damn nice guy," while Estelle was a sweet little pretty-plain brunette who could see the value in the damn nice guys of the world. As they headed for the diner's door, holding hands and dreamy eyed, I silently wished them good times.

So inspired, I headed for the back booth to see if any of the ladies might be interested in driving over to the river to see if the water still ran downhill. I'd just started to unreel my line when somebody screamed out in the parking lot.

I was the one on my feet, so I was the first one out the door.

A second scream guided me toward a pale blur at the far side of the lot. The blur was Lee Curtis's gray-primered A-V8 coupe. Lee

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was sprawled on the ground beside the open driver's door with Estelle kneeling beside him. For a second I thought I heard the sound of running footsteps crunching on the gravel, then I had other things to worry about. Reaching past Estelle to the dashboard of Lee's rod, I pulled on the headlight switch. In the backglare from the sealed beams I could see blood smearing Lee's face and soaking his T-shirt. I put my hand on his chest, trying to ignore the sticky wetness. He was breathing.

"'Stelle, what the hell happened?"

"He hit Lee," she blubbered. "Over and over!"

"Who did, 'Stelle?"

"The old man trying to steal Lee's car."

Sure enough, by the dash light I could see a couple of wires torn loose from the ignition switch.

The gang gathered around us, stunned and goggling. Fairmont wasn't a place where you got to see a lot of people beaten into a fair imitation of a cube steak. With nobody else around to do it, I started giving orders.

"Marty, go inside and call the doctor and Lee's folks! Hey, Johnny Roy, I got a blanket behind the seat in my rod. Bring it here!"

I peeled off my jacket and wadded it up under Lee's head. Then I used my driving scarf to sop off some of the blood. After a minute Lee started to moan.

"Take it easy, man." I said.

"Wha . . ." he started to mush, then his swelling eyes snapped open. "My car!"

"Still here. He didn't get it."

"'Stelle . . ."

"He didn't get her, either."

Lee groped for his girl and she caught his hand, pressing it against her teary cheek.

"He was hot-wiring my rod, Kevin. He had a gun . . . Swear to God . . . He busted me with it. . . . Moved faster'n a snake. . . . Never had a chance."

A bulky shadow fell across me, blocking out the lights of the diner. "The doc and Lee's folks are on their way," Marty Snustaad reported.

Eddie, the counter man from the Route 22, came hustling up as well. "I called the night marshal, too."

I looked up at him sourly. "Jeez, Eddie! Aren't things bad enough as is?"

Night Marshal Hiram Dooley was a redoubtable and fearless foe of Fairmont township's most dangerous criminal elements, like anyone under twenty who wears a leather jacket and drives a hot rod. Broad-shouldered, bullet-headed, and bristle-skulled, he

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scribbled in his little black notebook between glowers at my gang and me.

Dooley and I go way back. Mostly it's for laughs (on my part, anyway) but tonight, with a friend of mine beaten to a pulp and his girl crying, with his blood on her skirt, the Dewlap was beginning to bug me.

Lee's folks had him propped up in the end booth while Doc Jorgenson, our sawed-off local sawbones, worked on him. The doc was worried about a possible concussion. That only left 'Stelle for Dooley to pick on.

"All right, Miss Archer, let's have it again," the Dewlap demanded. "You left the diner and then what happened?"

Estelle sat perched on one of the maroon Naugahyde counter stools, shivering hard. "We left the diner," she repeated, fighting to keep her voice steady, "and we were about halfway across the parking lot when we saw the door on Lee's car was open. Somebody was kneeling on the ground beside it.

"Lee yelled that someone was trying to steal his car and he ran over to stop him. There was a fight. The man . . . the thief, had a gun, and he hit Lee with it . . . he kept hitting him, as hard as he could! I saw Lee fall and all I could do was scream and then everyone was coming out of the diner and the thief ran off. That's all."

The girl took a shuddering breath and Dooley scowled, checking her words against his notes. "What did this car thief look like, Miss Archer?"

"I couldn't really see, Marshal. There was hardly any light. He wasn't very big, but he moved fast, really fast. He was wearing a suit, a dark suit. I remember I could see a white shirt and a dark necktie. And he had gloves on. And his hair was light-colored; I think he had gray hair, so he must have been older. And he had that gun . . . and he hit Lee with it!"

'Stelle gritted her teeth and screwed up her eyes, trying to hold it together.

Dooley sighed like a deflating truck tire and deliberately flipped his notebook shut, stowing it in the pocket of his uniform shirt. "All right, Miss Archer. Let's quit the fun and games. Now how about telling me the truth!"

Estelle's head snapped up, her dark eyes wide and startled. "But I am, Marshal! I am! That's what happened!"

"You can get yourself and your boyfriend into a lot of trouble lying to the police, Miss Archer. Who are you covering up for and why?"

I'd been leaning against the counter a couple of stools down, feeling my temperature gauge kicking into the red. "You're way off the beam, man!" I snapped. "Everyone here's giving you a square count, especially 'Stelle."

Like a teed-off Durham bull, Dooley swung to face me. "Come off

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it, Pulaski! A pistol-packing grandpa coming out here to steal one of your gang's jalopies? Not likely!"

"Then whaddya think did happen?" I demanded.

"That the Curtis boy got into a beef with somebody out here and you worked him over. Now either he doesn't want to squeal or he's afraid to!"

The Dewlap wasn't going to be satisfied until he had a juvenile delinquency problem to call his own, just like the big-city cops.

"Jeez, Dooley! Hang a wreath around your neck! Your brain just died and your head's in mourning!"

"Watch that smart mouth, Pulaski!"

"Go check out Lee's rod," I said patiently, trying to gear myself down. "You can see where somebody hot-wired it."

"Maybe so, but who'd want to steal one of those junk heaps except another member of your gang?"

I reminded myself that the momentary pleasure of busting our friendly neighborhood justice merchant in the chops would not make up for six months at the county youth farm. "Look! Nobody here stole anything or beat up anybody! Ask Eddie!"

"Well, maybe so," the Dewlap grudged, "but this whole crazy yarn just doesn't make any sense."

"Neither did Mr. Kennedy robbing his own jewelry store, but that happened, too."

Dooley winced. Awhile back, the night marshal had tried to run another Fairmont hot rodder in for a burglary he hadn't done, and he still hadn't entirely forgiven me for proving him wrong.

"It just doesn't make any sense," Dooley muttered.

"Maybe not, Hiram." Doc Jorgensen came waddling up to join us. "But these kids are certainly telling the truth about one thing. This wasn't any common beating. That boy was pistol-whipped, and savagely. The cuts from the trigger guard and gunsights are unmistakable."

"Are you sure, Doc?" the marshal asked.

Doc Jorgensen lifted one bushy eyebrow. "I interned in a Chicago receiving hospital back in the good old days, Hiram. I know what a Joliet facial looks like."

Lee's folks took him into the hospital in Indianapolis for X-rays and Sally Tremain and her girlfriends drove Estelle home. Me, I patched up Lee's ignition and drove his car back to the Curtis farm.

Lee stowed his rod in a shed off their big barn and as I got out to open the doors, Race, the Curtis's sheepdog, yapped out to meet me. Race and I are old buddies. He planted his forepaws on my chest and panted dog breath into my face as I gave his ears a good scratch.

I backed Lee's rod into the shed/workshop and shut it down.

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Then I snapped on the overhead light and did a slow walk-around on the car, checking it out.

Lee and I had both been building Model A's but we'd produced two radically different machines. The A-Bomb was a fenderless roadster powered by a Model B straight-four. Lee, on the other hand, had put together a full-fendered A-V8 coupe. That is, a Model A with a V-8 engine swapped in from a later-model Ford.

Lee's car was still sort of a work in progress. The body had been sanded down and primered but it hadn't been painted yet, and the cuts and welds of the chop job done on the top still showed as raw, blackened scars. The interior had been gutted to bare metal as well, with nothing replaced but the cut-down '40 Ford dashboard and steering wheel and some fake leopard-skin covers on the bench seat.

Like most of us who'd gowed up a Model A, Lee had Deuce-nosed his car, replacing the stock radiator shell, radiator, and hood with parts taken from a '32 Ford, both for the better cooling and for the sharper look. I lifted the side panel of the hood and studied the inside of the neat engine compartment.

The dirt-common twenty-one-bolt Flathead had been lifted from the same wrecked sedan that had donated Lee's steering wheel, dashboard, and hydraulic brakes. The mill had been rebuilt with Denver heads, an Almquist dual-intake manifold, and a pair of reconditioned Stromberg 97 carburetors, a mild soup job put together by a decent mechanic who didn't have a whole lot of money to spend.

I leaned back against the rough plank wall of the shed and crossed my arms. I had to admit the Dewlap was right about one thing. Something wacky was going on here. To me, or to any other rodney, Lee's beast was a thing of great beauty, a cool machine getting cooler. But to your average suit-wearing square, this car would be about as appealing as a cow pie.

I heard Race barking out in the barn lot and I saw a set of headlights turning in from the road. I recognized the anemic grumble of Marty Snustaad's '38 DeSoto sedan. I'd asked Marty and Johnny Roy to pick me up and take me back to where I'd left the A-Bomb.

I ducked under Lee's hood for another second before buttoning it up. Then I turned out the light and closed the shed doors. I was also careful to snap on the heavy padlock I found hanging from the hasp.

I knew I'd be coming back out to the Curtis farm the next day. Somehow I also knew I'd be coming back to trouble.

Early on the following morning I tore out county road 11A to the Curtis place. Sure enough, Marshal Dooley's black Plymouth was parked in the barn lot. Dooley was standing beside the shed where

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I'd left Lee's rod. Lee was out there, too, in his bathrobe and pajamas and with a bandage on his head, as was Mr. Curtis, with his inevitable old felt hat tugged down over his eyes. Another tall, lanky, handsome-homely man, Mr. Curtis had been the model they'd built his son on.

Somebody wasn't there, though. Race didn't come out to meet me as I turned in from the road.

"Hey, Lee," I said, hoisting myself over the A-Bomb's welded door. "What's goin' on, man?"

"He came back, Kev." Lee's voice was tight. "The son of a bitch tried to steal my car again and he shot Race!"

Lee's rod still stood inside the shed, but the doors had been forced open, the hasp and padlock dangling from splintered wood.

"You brought this car back here last night, Pulaski," Dooley challenged me. "What time was it?"

"About eleven-thirty–twelve o'clock, I guess. Race was alive then."

"We got back from the city about two-thirty, Marshal," Lee's father added. "Race didn't come out to meet us. That was kind of funny, but Lee's mother and I were worried about gettin' him to bed. We didn't think much about it at the time."

"Did you see anything funny out here, Pulaski?"

I tried to remember. Had there been a set of headlights trailing behind me as I'd driven out to the farm?

I shook my head. "I dunno. Nothing I can really say."

The driver's door of Lee's rod was standing half open. I stepped around it and hunkered down to study the dashboard. Yeah, the ignition wires I'd fixed last night had been torn loose again and a hot-wire installed.

Lee came up behind me. "Whoever he is, he sure wants my car bad."

"Or something in that car," the Dewlap said, eyeing us suspiciously.

I shook my head. "Nah. He's after the car."

"How do you figure that, Pulaski?"

"By using the common sense God gave a gearshift knob, Dooley. The tools and junk under the seat and the stuff in the glove box are all like I left them. Nothing's been scattered around. This guy went straight to the hot-wire job. He wasn't searching, he was stealing."

"Jeez," Lee breathed, "I'm sure lucky he wasn't able to get her started."

"No luck to it, man." I stood up, digging into my jacket pocket. "Here are your keys and your distributor rotor."

"Damn! Thanks, Kev! I owe you! You saved my tail again."

I shrugged. "So stand me a malt next time we hit the diner. Make it a double and we'll be evens."

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Lee had to get back to bed—the doc wanted him to take it easy for a few days—and his dad had a sad chore to do. Dooley made all the right noises about notifying the county sheriff and keeping his eyes open and we got out of there. As we headed back to our cars, Dooley gave me that old look again.

"All right, Pulaski. What made you pull the rotor on that car the way you did?"

"Hell, Dooley, I dunno." I lit up from my soft pack of Luckys and offered the night marshal one. "It just sort of seemed like a good idea."

As Dooley drove off, I sat in the A-Bomb and smoked my smoke right down to the butt, just thinking.

What the heck was it about Lee's rod that made it so important to somebody? I mean, car thieves might clip a set of wheels for a joyride or to strip down for parts, but if they botched the first grab, they'd just move on to the next one. They wouldn't stay after that one specific car unless there was something extra-special about it. And there wasn't anything extra-special about Lee Curtis's A-V8.

I was certain of that. Lee and I had swapped tools, parts, and help working on our cars and I knew Lee's rod as well as I knew my own. There just wasn't anything there.

That we could see, anyway.

I fired up and headed out, hunting for the guy who had sold Lee his wheels.

Lee had bought his Model A from another of the local farmers. Mr. Wright had been using the coupe for a field car until the rear end had gone out on it and he'd been happy to sell the remains to Lee for five dollars. Luckily for me, Mr. Wright was an adult I was in good with. He didn't have a teenaged daughter, and I'd resuscitated his old Farmall tractor after every other mechanic in the county had given it up as a lost cause.

He brought the Farmall to a stop and looked on as I vaulted the fence and walked across the field to where he was plowing. "Good mornin', son," he called over the deliberate *pa-chug* of the exhaust. "What can I he'p you with?"

"I just got a question for you, Mr. Wright," I yelled back. "Remember that old Model A you sold to Lee Curtis?"

"Sure. I see him driving it around all the time. It's a marvel how you boys ever got that old rust bucket runnin' again."

"It wasn't any big deal, Mr. W. But what I need to know is who did you buy that car from?"

Mr. Wright's leathery wrinkles deepened as he thought back. "Bought it out'n an ad in the *Grant County Herald.* Mrs. Dugweiler up in Gas City was sellin' it. Her son, Lenny, come back from the war and bought her a new Chevi'let, so she didn't need that old A Model, and she sold it."

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The farmer grinned in horse trader's triumph. "I remember she was askin' twenty-five for it and I beat her down to twenty."

"Yeah, well, thanks, Mr. Wright, I appreciate it." I started back to the road.

"What's so important about that ol' car all of a sudden? Why's ever'body askin' about it?"

I turned back instantly. "Why do you say that, Mr. Wright? Has somebody else been asking about Lee's car?"

The farmer nodded. "Not two days back."

"Uh, what did this guy look like?"

"Nobody I know. Not too big of a fella. A town man, wearin' a blue suit. Comin' on my age, I guess. He had gray hair, anyway. He was askin' about that old A Model and what I'd done with it. I told him, but I didn't take to him much. He had a mean eye."

From the Wright farm it was up to Mrs. Dugweiler's place in Gas City. After explaining that I wasn't a Mormon, a Jehovah's Witness, or other such tool of the Devil and why I was there, she told me her late husband had bought the coupe from Ned Trubman back in Fairmont. After thanking her for the information and her kind invitation to come to Jesus I headed back down Aylsbury Pike.

After standing on Ned Trubman's front porch for half an hour, listening to how that damn Ford was the biggest mistake he'd ever made and how he'd never drive anything but a Graham-Page again, I found out that he'd bought the car from a Mrs. Kane over on Walnut Street.

And guess what? Everywhere I went that morning, some little guy with a blue suit, gray hair, and mean eyes had gone before.

I hit the dead end on Walnut Street. Mrs. Kane didn't live there anymore. A neighbor said she'd left town about ten years back and nobody knew where she'd gone.

There was something about the name "Kane," though. I'd heard it talked up around town for some reason I couldn't quite remember. And there'd been something funny in the way her former neighbors had looked at me when I'd asked about the lady.

A few minutes later I was parking the A-Bomb on Main Street. I climbed one flight up over the Rexall drugstore to the office of Mr. Nolan Everts, attorney-at-law.

I could hear a typewriter clattering away inside and as I was pushing through the door, the pretty brown-haired, blue-eyed lady seated at the secretary's desk looked up at me and smiled.

"Hello, son."

"Hi, Mom." I flopped down in one of the scarred reception-room chairs.

Mom had been a top-flight legal secretary in Memphis before she'd married Dad, and she kept her hand in working part-time for Fairmont's best, and, for that matter, only, lawyer. Today was a

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Saturday, but she'd come in for a couple of hours to take care of some odds and ends.

"Do you know anything about some people named Kane who used to live over on Walnut?"

I was an odd kind of a teenager, I guess. I had this peculiar notion that my parents actually knew about stuff.

My mother gave me the same odd look as the Kanes' former neighbors. "Why? What about them?"

Over breakfast that morning I'd told my folks about Lee getting clobbered. Now I filled Mom in on what else I'd learned.

"They used to own Lee's car. And people act kind of weird whenever I ask about them."

"I'm not at all surprised, Kevin. Albert Kane went to prison for the wire-mill payroll theft."

Now I knew why that name had sounded familiar. It'd happened a couple of years before we'd moved to Fairmont, but it had been the biggest deal to hit town since they'd brought in the gas wells.

"This Kane guy was the one who robbed the mill?"

"It was a burglary, Kevin. Not a robbery." Mom likes to be precise about things like that.

She went over to the row of old wooden filing cabinets and removed a big expandable folder full of paperwork. "Mr. Everts was Albert Kane's defense attorney, not that the defense proved very successful."

Mom went over the case with me. The Fairmont wire mill was the town's biggest employer, and back in 1938, on a night before a payday, someone had busted into the mill's office and used a cutting torch on the company safe. Better than twenty thousand dollars had been lifted, long bread for a town just digging out of the depression.

The Grant County sheriff and the state police had worked the case, but after three weeks of investigation, nothing had turned up. Then the wife of Albert Kane, one of the machinists at the mill, had blown the horn on her old man.

She recanted on the alibi she had originally given for her husband, saying he'd threatened her into lying to the police. Then she'd nailed the lid down on the coffin by handing over a number of bills with serial numbers matching those stolen from the factory safe.

Apparently the lady didn't fancy taking the fall on an accessory charge. Apparently she didn't fancy her husband very much, either, because when the opportunity presented itself to send him on a long voyage up the creek, she took advantage of it.

Kane was already under suspicion, thanks to his being a dab hand with a torch, and the case against him came together pretty rapidly. He was found holding some of the hot bills as well, and

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the state crime lab matched some of the marks made on the safe with tools in Kane's crib at the mill.

Kane got sent over the hill to the big house, but the wire mill never got its money back.

"Kane refused to reveal where he'd hidden the bulk of the payroll," Mom finished, closing the file. "That's probably why he was given ten years without parole. Mrs. Kane was granted a divorce shortly after her husband was sent to prison and I gather she moved away to start over again somewhere else."

"After selling off everything around the old homestead, including the family wheels," I mused.

"I gather you think this has something to do with the theft of the Curtis boy's car?"

"I dunno, Mom. But there are a couple of interesting tens showing up here: a burglary ten years back and a thief who took a ten-year fall for it. And that big wad of dough is still drifting around loose."

I shoved out of my chair. "See you at dinner tonight, Mom."

She lifted an eyebrow at me in that special, loving, long-suffering-mother way of hers. "Are you getting yourself into trouble again, Kevin?"

I leaned over the desk and kissed her on the forehead. "I dunno yet. I'll keep you posted."

My next stop was on the second floor of the Jefferson Street boardinghouse.

"Hey, Dooley! Make the scene, man!" I yelled, hammering on the door. "Time to fight the forces of evil!"

The door hurled open to reveal the Dewlap in all his glory and his washday-dingy skivvies. I won't say our night marshal was actually breathing fire, but it was close.

"Pulaski, what in the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I don't like it either, but I need your help."

It could have been worse. He didn't try to strangle me as I laid out what I'd learned about Lee Curtis, his car, and its notorious former owner.

"So you figure it's Kane coming back for his car?"

"Not for the car, man, but the boodle!" I replied. "Somehow there has got to be some kind of connection between Kane's old heap and where he stashed the payroll from the wire mill."

"You mean like a map or something hidden in the car?"

"Like, I dunno, Dooley! It's the only thing that makes any sense as to why anyone would want that particular set of wheels that bad. What we need to know is if Kane's been sprung recently. You can find that out. You're a cop . . . sort of."

It must have hurt like passing a kidney stone, but I could see my story leaking through all that ivory to whatever Dooley used for a brain.

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"All right . . . lemme get my pants on. But I'm warning you, Pulaski, if this is some kind of stunt . . ."

We went down the hall to the rooming-house pay phone and Dooley started spending nickels. A few minutes later he hung up the receiver, a peculiar expression on his face. "Albert Kane was released two weeks ago upon completion of his sentence."

"I heard you asking about a description. Did they say what he looks like now?

"Age fifty-five, five eight, hundred and sixty pounds. Gray hair, brown eyes."

Dooley and I just looked at each other. A little gray-haired guy with mean eyes and a blue prison-issue suit.

"I'm going to get dressed and go out to the Curtis place," Dooley said, suddenly looking a lot more like a lawman.

"I'll follow you out."

We were a little bit too late. As we wheeled up the shale driveway, Lee and his dad came tearing out of the Curtis's white frame farmhouse, his father running to Dooley's Plymouth and Lee running to the A-Bomb.

"How'd you guys get here so fast?" Lee panted. "We only called in a couple of minutes ago."

"What do you mean, Lee? Who'd you call?"

"The sheriff! He came back again, Kevin! And this time he got my car!"

That afternoon, Lee's dad had gone down to his south pasture to set his irrigation water and his mom had been washing the cream separator on the back porch. Lee still wasn't worth much so he'd been lying down in his room when he'd heard the familiar roar of his hot rod firing up.

He and his mom had made the front yard just in time to see the A-V8 tearing out of the barn lot and taking off down the road.

"Did you put the rotor back in?" I asked.

"Heck no!" Lee replied vehemently. "But you know I'm running a standard Lucas distributor. He could have picked up a replacement rotor at just about any garage or parts store."

The Curtises and I were sitting around their kitchen table. Dooley was off with the sheriff, chasing after Lee's stolen car, and it had been left to me to bring the family up to date on what was going on.

Like any good farm wife, Mrs. Curtis had parked a big slab of her homemade caramel cake and a glass of milk in front of me, but I didn't have much of an appetite.

"If it'll make you feel any better, Lee, you'll probably get your rod back," I said, poking a fork at the cake. "Kane will probably ditch it on a back road somewhere after he gets whatever he wants out of it."

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"And he's welcome to," Mr. Curtis said, "just as long as he leaves us alone afterwards."

"Still," Lee's mom mused, "I wonder what it could be?"

Lee shook his bandaged head, wincing a little. "I don't know, Mom. I had that car as knocked down as you could get. It was nothing but a pile of parts. Kevin worked on it with me. He can tell you."

I could only agree. "I can't see how we could have missed anything. At least anything that looked like twenty thousand bucks."

"Could there have been something . . . oh, like a bank book or a map stitched into the upholstery?" Mrs. Curtis asked. She subscribed to both *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *True Detective* magazine and I suspect she was thinking that all this was actually kinda cool.

"If there was, it's long gone now," Lee replied glumly. "We pulled all the rotten old rugs and seat covers and stuff out of the coupe and burned them on the trash heap."

"That couldn't have been it, anyway," I added. "All Kane would have had to do was look inside the car to see it'd been stripped. Why steal it, then?"

"Maybe—" Mrs. Curtis was really trying now—"there was a map drawn or etched somewhere on Lee's car, one that was painted over somehow . . ."

"Ma, that ol' Model A had more rust on it than paint when I bought it," Lee said patiently. "And if there was anything like that it's long gone, too. Kevin and I sanded that body down to bare metal before we primered it."

"Besides, Mrs. Curtis," I added, "what would Kane need a map for? If he'd hidden the money somewhere, he'd just go get it. We're still missing something."

"Whatever it is, we're out of it now," Mr. Curtis said. "It's somebody else's problem."

I wasn't so sure.

My mom had whipped up a real good dinner that night—pork chops, mashed potatoes, and applesauce, with strawberry ice cream for dessert. I still wasn't all that hungry. I told my folks about what had been going on with Lee and his family and told my older brother Frank to shove it when he started calling me Sam Spade.

After dinner, I went out back to our garage, where the A-Bomb lives. Parking myself on a shop stool, I hunched over and did some thinking.

I'd found out some time back that working out a problem is like fixing an engine. You have to take it apart and check out each individual component till you find that one specific part that's gone west on you.

Once upon a time Albert Kane had owned Lee's car. Then Kane

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had stolen a big bunch of money and had gone to prison for it. Kane's wife had sold the car while he was in the pen and now that he was out again he wanted that particular car back in the worst way. It couldn't be for the car itself. I mean, I could see a guy getting totally gone over something like a boat-tailed Auburn or a Lincoln Zephyr but not a beat-up Model A.

It had to be something hidden *in* the car that Kane figured was still there. It also couldn't be anything obvious or something you could just reach in and grab. You had to have some time alone with the car to get at whatever it was.

What could you hide where?

In a tire? Lee had junked the old wire wheels for a set of steel rims and the old rubber was scattered all over the county as tree swings and slingshots.

In the gas tank? Lee and I had torn out the coupe's old cowl mount and had replaced it with a rear-mounted tank we'd lifted out of a wrecked '38 Dodge.

How about the crankcase? Lee had traded the A's original engine to Abel Kirby for a banjo rear end. The old four-banger powered Abel's firewood saw now and I knew for a fact that he'd torn it down to stick in a new set of bearings. If he'd found any buried treasure, he hadn't mentioned it down at the pool hall.

I studied the A-Bomb in the twilight leaking through the garage windows, trying to visualize where something could be hidden in it. My little black roadster was a whole lot different from Lee's coupe, but they'd both started out as Model-A Fords. They still had a lot in common.

Come to think about it, the two hot rods did have a lot in common.

I turned that thought over for a while longer, and then I broke out a jack and slid it under the A-Bomb's rear axle. I chocked the front wheels, lifted her, and wedged a couple of stands under the frame. Tightening my biggest Carborundum-tipped bit into a hand drill, I creepered under my car.

Five minutes later I tore in through the back door of the house. "Hey, Mom, Dad, I gotta go out to the Curtis place! I might be spending the night out there. See ya later."

I tore right back out again before anybody could ask any questions.

I had to use my headlights as I roared out 11A. But I didn't drive straight to the Curtis farm. I turned off on the irrigation canal access and went in across their back pasture on foot, keeping low. Kane might already be spying on the farm again.

Mr. Curtis answered my knock on the back door. "Kevin, what in creation . . ."

I cut him off. "He's coming back!"

"Who?"

"Albert Kane, the guy who stole Lee's car! He's gonna be back, he's gonna be sore, and he's gonna be coming after Lee!"

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The gray-haired man in the cheap blue suit hid in the night beside the haystack. He was mad. In fact, he was furious. But he was also patient. He'd learned that in his decade in a jail cell.

He'd been watching the Curtis family over the past few days and he knew there were only the three of them: the father, the mother, and the son.

A little while ago, the long, lean father and the shorter, rounder mother had gotten into the family pickup truck and had driven off. He'd made out the outline of the father's inevitable felt hat silhouetted against the porch light.

Now there was just the son, alone in the farmhouse, and as he watched, the light in his bedroom went out. . . .

I heard a soft tapping sound, then the tinkle of falling glass. This was it. The back door window was being busted.

I lay in the dark under the hot covers of Lee's bed, trying to keep my breathing slow and steady, like a guy asleep. Lee's bedroom was on the ground floor. He wouldn't have far to come.

Faint footsteps on the linoleum, a kitchen chair scraped, a pause, then he was moving again. The bedroom door swung open and the room light blazed on.

"All right, you little . . ."

There was a hollow *clonk* and the sound of a body falling. I rolled out of the bed to find Albert Kane sprawled on the floor with Mr. Curtis standing over him. The ex-con didn't even twitch. Generally you don't after a big, rawboned dirt farmer lets you have it with the butt of a .30-30.

For the second time that week, Doc Jorgenson sent somebody down to Indianapolis to get his head X-rayed. Only this patient went handcuffed in the backseat of a state police car. Afterwards, Lee, his folks, Marshal Dooley, and I sat for a while around the Curtises' kitchen table. Mrs. Curtis made coffee and broke out more of her caramel cake. This time I could do it justice.

"You should have called the law, Curtis," the Dewlap grumped.

"We weren't certain if anything would come of it," the farmer replied evenly. "Besides, it was my boy and my house so I figured it was my problem."

"I still don't understand how you knew Kane was coming back here."

"Kevin figured it out." Mr. Curtis nodded toward me. "He set up the trap, too. He figured that Lee and me look enough alike so that in poor light we could be mistaken for each other. We sent Lee and Ruth up the road to my brother's place to make Kane think Lee'd been left alone. Then Kevin and I waited for him to come on in."

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Dooley shot me a sour look. "Okay, Pulaski, what made you think Kane was coming back?"

"He had to, Dooley. When he finally got his hands on Lee's hot rod and found that the payroll money he'd hidden in it wasn't there anymore, shaking Lee down would be his only chance of ever getting it back."

"Wait a minute. I thought you kids said that you'd taken that car apart and there wasn't any money hidden in it."

"There wasn't," I replied. "By then it was gone."

"Well then, what the he—" Dooley heroically strangled himself off in honor of Mrs. Curtis. "What happened to it?"

"That's kinda complicated."

The Dewlap started to turn purple. Mrs. Curtis's presence wasn't going to hold him back much longer.

"Here's the deal," I went on. "Ten years ago, when Kane burned the safe at the wire mill, he figured, rightly, that as an employee and a good hand with a cutting torch he'd be under suspicion. So he hid most of the loot in his car in a way and a place he figured no one would ever find it, planning to sit on it until the heat was off.

"What he didn't figure on was getting caught and sent up the river anyway. Or that his old lady would take off, selling his car for running money. So, when Kane was sprung at the end of his sentence, he returned to Fairmont looking for his loaded Model A.

"He tracked the car through several different owners until he came to Lee over there. Then, once he'd found it, he stole it so he could get the payroll out of it."

I forked up another bite of cake. "But what he didn't figure on was that his car had been built into a hot rod."

"So?" the Dewlap grunted.

"So what Kane didn't understand and what you don't either, Dooley, is that a hot rod isn't just one car, it's a whole lot of cars. It's a big pile of different parts that have been pieced together to make an all-new and unique set of wheels. And as you swap the new parts in, you trade off or junk the old ones.

"After Lee got done gowing his A up, pretty much the only part of the original vehicle that was left was the body, and that wasn't where Kane stashed the loot. When Kane discovered that the really important part was missing, he had to come back here to find out what Lee had done with it."

"Okay! Fine! Fantastic!" Dooley roared. "Where's the money now!"

My grin widened. "I have it."

"Whaaaaaaat?!"

"I've had it all along. I just didn't know it. When Lee and I were building our beasts, Lee decided he wanted to build an A-V8, a Model A with a V-8 engine. The easiest way to work that particular conversion is to swap in the frame from a later-model 1932 Ford. The Deuce was set up to accept a bent eight.

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"But I was gonna run a Model B engine in my rod, a straight-four, so I could still use the original Model A frame. The one from Lee's car was in good shape, so I traded him a front axle and a spring pack for it. Lee's old frame is out there under the A-Bomb right now.

"Now, when I was working on that frame I noticed there was something kind of funny about it. It had already been partially boxed in."

"Boxed in?" Dooley questioned.

"Yeah, it's something you do when you build a serious racing rod. You weld side plates onto all of the frame member's girders to make the car stronger and stiffer and improve the handling. You just don't see a boxing job done on a stock car. But a partial box job had been done on the frame of Albert Kane's Model A. Beyond it saving me some work, I didn't think much about it at the time.

"But I got to thinking about it again this evening, so I got under and drilled through those old side plates."

I dug a greasy envelope out of my jacket pocket and dumped its contents in the middle of the table. "This stuff came out with the drill bit. The fibers are from some kind of asbestos wrapping and the shreds of paper are—"

"Money!" Dooley exclaimed, poking at the little green fragments with a stumpy finger.

"Exactamundo! From a tight, flattened roll of bills. Kane was a machinist and a shop man and he was the aces with an acetylene torch, either cutting or welding. He welded the stolen money into the frame of his car, behind those side plates, figuring it would be the last place anyone would ever think to look. And it was."

"I'm impounding that car until we can get that money!" the Dewlap roared.

"Ah, put it in the fridge, Dooley!" I snorted back. "I'm not going anywhere. Tomorrow morning I'll take the Bomb over to Payne's Shell station and pop those side plates off. You and a rep from the wire mill can stand around and count as I dig the dough out for you."

"I guess that'll be all right," Dooley grumbled. "I suppose if you intended to keep it for yourself, you wouldn't have told anyone about it."

"Hey, Dooley, what can I say? I considered it. Who wouldn't? But it would have meant leaving Lee's neck on the chopping block. Besides, it would have killed all the kicks around here."

"Kicks? Whaddaya mean?" Dooley asked suspiciously.

"I mean, with that twenty grand I could build me the hottest soup job the state of Indiana has ever seen! Dirt-track competition would be a walkover, nobody would ever want to drag race with me anymore, and you, the sheriff, and the Indiana State Police combined wouldn't have a chance of catching me out on the roads."

I shook my head. "Where's the sport, man? Where's the sport?" ●

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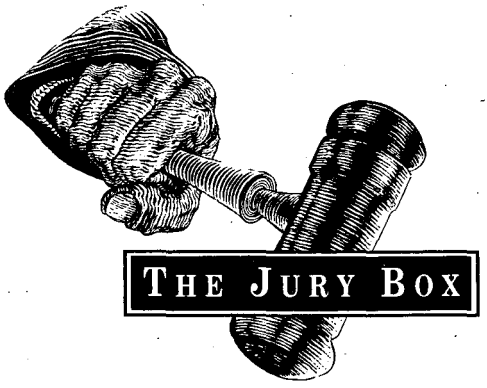

by Jon L. Breen

How broadly can the crime-mystery-suspense genre be defined? Consider two new novels, one written for an audience of adults, the other for teenagers, but both able to cross those boundaries and find receptive readers. Whether they are truly crime novels is arguable, but they are certainly structured as mysteries. Both have apparent supernatural overtones, the extent uncertain to the end, and include some unconventional detection. Pigeonholes aside, both are highly recommended.

**** Sally Beauman: *The Sisters Mortland,* Warner, $24.95. In a complexly constructed, beautifully written novel that is just as unconventional a family saga as it is a mystery, multiple narrators cover three decades in the life of the titular sisters, whose summer of 1967 ended in gradually revealed tragedy at the family home, a medieval Suffolk abbey. The book is longer than it needs to be—few 432-page novels aren't—but the characters and their relationships are enthralling, believable, and constantly surprising. Most of the questions posed are answered, but the reader is left wondering about the motivation for the central act and how much of the supernatural element is real and how much purely psychological.

**** Brent Hartinger: *Grand & Humble,* HarperTempest, $15.99. Two high school students—one a popular athlete and Senator's son, the other a geeky outsider—are troubled, by premonitions and nightmares respectively. In alternate chapters, they are brought to an astonishing surprise ending, unlikely to be anticipated but fairly clued for the reader detective. The immensely talented author is a master of structure, but even without the stunt conclusion, the well-realized characters would grip readers of all ages.

**** Max Allan Collins: *Road to Paradise,* Morrow, $24.95. It is now 1973, and Michael Satariano (né O'Sullivan) has the relatively legit job of managing a Lake Tahoe gambling resort

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when holdovers from his criminal past necessitate his killing once again. This remarkable piece of sustained storytelling is the best of the trilogy that began with the graphic novel (later great film) *Road to Perdition.* (Collins is so generally good on period detail, it's a shame one of his characters misuses the phrase "begs the question" in the currently trendy and abominable fashion.)

**** Lisa Scottoline: *Dirty Blonde,* HarperCollins, $25.95. Federal Judge Cate Fante's compulsion to pick up men in sleazy bars threatens her career when murder and blackmail follow her reluctant decision in a case charging theft of a TV series concept. Of the many legal thriller writers in current practice, Scottoline ranks in the top handful by virtue of her people, plot, humor, and vivid Philadelphia background. This is among her best.

*** William Bernhardt: *Capitol Murder,* Ballantine, $25.95. In a Washington, D.C., federal court, Ben Kincaid defends Senator Todd Glancy, Democrat of Oklahoma, on charges of murdering intern Veronica Cooper, with whom he had a video-documented sexual relationship. Bernhardt's trial action is so excellent, some buffs may resent leaving it so often for the investigation of a vampire cult. The main clue is admirably fair, but experienced readers will already have guessed the killer, unless they think the least-suspected-person gimmick is too ancient for contemporary recycling.

*** Kerry Greenwood: *Cocaine Blues,* Poisoned Pen, $23.95. The first novel about roaring-'twenties amateur detective Phryne Fisher, published in Australia in 1989, concerns Melbourne's drug and abortion industries. The tricky plot, lively writing, likable flapper sleuth, and superb sense of period will delight readers who have already read (or will be motivated to seek) later books in the series already issued by Poisoned Pen.

*** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *Terror Town,* Forge, $23.95. Chicago cop Abe Lieberman works on cases involving a troubled former Chicago Cub, a murdered single mother with unexplained sudden wealth, a street-preaching son of a rabbi who may be madman or conman or both, and an inner-city savior with political aspirations but a closet full of skeletons. Though this one lacks the resonance of some other books in a distinguished series, Lieberman is always stimulating company.

*** Linda Fairstein: *Death Dance,* Scribner, $26. In a case with acknowledged similarities to a real-life 1980 murder, the Metropolitan Opera House again becomes a crime scene, as a prima ballerina first disappears and later is found dead, with a multiplicity of possible suspects for D.A. Alex Cooper and her police colleagues. Part of the plot involves a proposed musical based on the early-20th-century Harry K. Thaw-

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Stanford White-Evelyn Nesbit case. Always determined to give her readers their money's worth, Fairstein provides a wealth of detail about New York theater history along with the crime problem.

The spirit of Ellery Queen lives on in a new character from Jim French Productions, that prolific provider of radio mysteries. The sleuth in *Hilary Caine Mysteries* ($9.95 for a CD of three shows), as written by M. J. Elliott and played by Karen Heaven, is an engaging and original character. The resident "girl detective" for a 1930s English tabloid will amuse some listeners, irritate others, and have both effects on many, in the mode of Golden Age sleuths like Lord Peter Wimsey, Philo Vance, Roger Sheringham, Reggie Fortune, and the early EQ. (The similarity of name, as made clear in the first episode, is a deliberate homage.) The plots are ingenious and fairly clued, though amenable to nitpicking; the tone humorous and ironic.

Among the reprints is one of the best formal detective novels of the past twenty years, Aaron Elkins's 1987 Edgar best-novel winner *Old Bones* (Berkley, $6.99), about Skeleton Detective Gideon Oliver. One of the top paperback characters of the 1950s, Stephen Marlowe's Washington, D.C., private eye Chester Drum, is revisited in the unusual and suspenseful *Violence Is My Business* (1958), paired with the earlier non-series *Turn Left for Murder* (1955) in a new omnibus (Stark House, $19.95) introduced by Marlowe.

The fifteenth edition of the loose-leaf *Edward D. Hoch Bibliography* (Moffatt House, P.O. Box 4456, Downey, CA 90241-1456; $10 plus $5 postage and handling), compiled by June M. Moffatt and Francis M. Nevins with several essays by Marvin Lachman, covers 1955 to early 2006 in an exhaustive 161 pages. For the statistically minded: Captain Leopold leads all Hoch series characters in appearances with 106 since March 1957, while Simon Ark is unchallenged in longevity with 59 cases since December 1955. Other long-lived and busy characters: Ben Snow (41 since 1961), Jeffery Rand (83 since 1965), Nick Velvet (84 since 1966), and Dr. Sam Hawthorne (68 since 1974).

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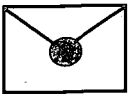

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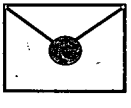

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

BACKROOM BOYS

by Peter Sellers

At one-thirty, after the Backroom had closed, Kevin served us draft beer in coffee cups. We could have swilled from bottles because no cops ever came, but Kevin had been well brought up and liked to break the law discreetly.

The Backroom was a live music club at the rear of a rib-and-burger joint on Bloor Street, across the road from the Royal Conservatory of Music. I didn't work there myself. I had a job in a bookstore up at Yonge and St. Clair. But I was drinking a fair amount in those days and the Backroom was as good a place as any to do it. The music was okay most of the time. Occasionally Kevin would slip me free food. And it seemed like a good place to meet chicks.

Sometimes, after hours, the musicians would stick around, try out new tunes and tell stories about life on the road. When they talked about the number of girls they'd had I got to wishing I could play an instrument. Unfortunately, I wasn't musical. In Grade Four, when every kid had to be in the choir, the teacher took me aside and told me just to mouth the words.

The musicians would describe gigs they played, from yacht-club

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dances to bars in Northern Ontario with screens in front of the stage to protect them from beer bottles and draft glasses. One balladeer, who sang of peace and romantic love, was booked into such a place by an unhappy accident. When the bottles wouldn't reach him, the locals pressed their faces against the screen and spat.

"Thank you," he'd say after each booed song. "I'm so glad you liked that one. Here's another new tune you might enjoy."

Kevin had been running the Backroom since spring. He had made the leap from waiter to manager on the strength of one stroke of good fortune. His girlfriend had previously gone out with the piano player in a local bar band. This group, Jerry Spoon and the Tectonic Plates, played three nights a week at the Victoria Hotel, a run-down beer joint at Queen and Soho. The residents of the hotel sat at a round table in front of the stage getting drunk. The rest of the crowd was loud and mostly pissed, and the owner, a former CFL fullback, kept in shape by throwing rowdies out. Jerry and the band wanted a better gig. Kevin saw his opportunity.

A former *EQMM* Readers Award winner, an esteemed editor of mystery anthologies, and a driving force behind several conventions and banquets for Canadian crime writers, Peter Sellers is one of the best known if least prolific of current writers. His rare short stories are always a treat. Over the past year the author's energy has gone to restoring his 100-year-old home (not to mention his advertising career) but he plans to begin writing more soon.

The Backroom's budget for music was four hundred bucks a week. For one guy and a guitar, that wasn't bad. For a five-piece band, it was laughable, even in 1977. But Jerry and the boys were so anxious to get out of the Victoria that they took the offer with little haggling. The usual working week was Tuesday to Saturday, four sets a night, from nine to one. The Plates wouldn't play Tuesday and they got all the food and beer they could consume. That was sure to add up to more than four hundred dollars, but Kevin figured it was worth it.

From the first Wednesday night, the Backroom was jammed. Spoon and the Plates drew students from University of Toronto residences and from the frat houses of the Annex, all within easy crawling distance. There was no cover, and the beer prices weren't bad.

That week the owners made more money than they ever had in one week before. They thanked Kevin by telling him to make sure it continued.

The first thing he did was to offer the Plates two more weeks. Over the previous seven days, Jerry had become a much shrewder businessman. The band agreed, for eight hundred a week.

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With the success of the Plates, people started paying attention to the Backroom. Singers phoned looking for gigs. Kevin didn't have to settle for whoever he could get. He was able to hire some of the brightest lights of the Canadian folk scene. Jackie Washington played the Backroom. So did David Wilcox, Willie P. Bennett, and a fourteen-year-old guitar hotshot who had to be smuggled in the back door and who filled the place by word of mouth.

Kevin would bring in the odd classical player from the Conservatory. There was a wicked lutist named Geordie, some impressive violin players, and the occasional classical guitarist who had chops, but none of them was as good a draw as the folk and blues musicians. The classical players didn't have loyal fans that would come and drink too much.

Someone who did have fans was Tom Lieberman.

Tom had been front man for a legendary local rock band that almost made it big. An excellent guitar player with a powerful, quirky voice, he wrote songs that were too offbeat for AM radio play. But the group got a lot of local club gigs and for a while was the house band at a local strip joint in the days of G-strings and an emcee between peelers.

When the band came apart, Tom took an acoustic guitar and reinvented himself as a folk club and coffeehouse performer. Like the Plates, Tom had a dedicated cult following. He was also newly back in town after eight months in Vancouver. Kevin reasoned that people who hadn't heard Tom for a while would jump at the chance.

Tom had surprised Kevin with his phone call. "This is Lieberman."

Kevin stayed professional. "Uh-huh," he said.

"I want to play at your establishment," Tom said. "I understand you pay four hundred dollars. That's fine. Next week suits me."

Kevin had a female duo booked for the following week. I was keen on the tambourine player. "I have something lined up," said Kevin, who was a good friend.

"I'm sure you can be very persuasive," Tom replied.

Kevin shifted the booking by giving the duo a second week and the promise of more time down the road. When he called Tom back to confirm, the singer said, "Good. I'll take cash in advance."

Kevin figured that having Tom on the bill was going to be a good thing, so he said yes. Having the tambourine player around for a second week made me happy, too. Kevin was a good pal.

It was obvious that Tom didn't want to be a singer anymore. His deal called for four sets of at least thirty minutes each. He timed each set to the second. Sometimes he'd check his watch in the middle of a tune, see that his half-hour was up, and stop playing. "That's enough of that delightful ditty," he'd say, and he'd leave the bandstand.

Behind the restaurant was a small employees-only parking lot

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with a larger public parking lot behind that. A low wooden fence divided the two lots and, on nights when the weather was good, Tom would perch there between sets and talk if someone else was there, or write if he was alone.

While out west Tom had published a collection of delicate poems called *Lover Man.* Gerald Haney, in the *Toronto Star,* said the book contained "luminous poems of lust and yearning." There was a rave in the *Globe and Mail* and *Now* claimed it was "a profound work of deep insight that stands with the best of Leonard Cohen and Gwendolyn McEwen."

Tom did readings whenever he could, selling copies from the stage. But it was hardly a living. The only other marketable skill he had was making music. So he played as infrequently as possible. Kevin was one of the few people who would give Tom work on his terms.

One night, a woman came in and sat at the table in the corner farthest from the bar. Tom was tuning his guitar and did not notice her. But I did. Even though the corner was dimly lit, I could tell she was good-looking. I went over to her table.

"Can I sit here?" I asked.

Her eyes were fixed on Tom. "I'm with the band," she said. I thought she was joking. Friends of band members always sat near the stage. But Tom never had girlfriends or groupies come out when he was playing. He was strictly business.

I looked at Tom, on his stool with a quart of Old Vienna on the floor beside him, as he plunked and bellowed. I looked at the woman again, but the way she was watching Tom told me my prospects were slim. I left. I doubt she noticed.

After the set, I went out back. "There's somebody here to see you," I said to Tom.

"They're all here to see me."

"I don't think she's just anybody." I described her.

"Where is she sitting?" As I told him, he took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. I looked at my watch. It was time for Tom to go back on. Scrupulous as he was about ending his sets on the dot, he was just as precise about starting on time.

"Coming in?" I asked.

"I'll be along," he said. Ten minutes later, he came in. His next set was subdued, all tender ballads. He hardly spoke. And he kept looking into the far corner of the room, but he wouldn't have made out much. He'd be able to tell that someone was there, but no more. There was nothing to see by then anyway. When I'd come in from the parking lot, she was gone.

The first two nights he played the Backroom, Tom read poetry during his sets. "This ain't a goddamn literary salon," one of the owners said to Kevin. "Tell that goofy bastard to kill the lovey-dovey stuff and sing."

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Surprisingly, Tom obliged. Kevin struck a compromise with him. Other performers sold their homemade cassettes from the stage, so Tom could sell his book. Every night, he'd carve a few minutes out of each short set. "I have copies available for just two dollars and fifty cents. Is it worth it, you ask? Indubitably. This inspiring volume includes words like *succulent, evanescent, languid,* and *voluptuous.* In fact, reading aloud from this book is guaranteed to get you laid. If it doesn't, my friend, then nothing will except cash money. That's why I'm not permitted to read aloud from my book this evening. The proprietors fear the orgy that is certain to ensue, and the subsequent descent of the morality squad." He'd go on in that manner for five minutes or more before starting another song. He sold a book or two every time.

The week after Tom played, the female folk duo came in. I was looking forward to watching Pat, the tambourine player, bang and rattle for two weeks. She had long dark hair and wore flowing ankle-length skirts that she made herself out of flamboyant fabrics. She'd sing and shake her head, setting her earrings jingling in time to the music. I was mesmerized. The second night they played, I'd had enough beer to make me relaxed but too much to let me remain cautious. I asked her out. She said no.

When I told Kevin how badly I had fared he said, "It's those skirts she wears. I bet there's something wrong with her legs."

For the next ten days, until Tom was booked in again, I didn't hang out much at the Backroom. I know when I'm not wanted.

Tom was friendly when he wasn't onstage. Out back, between sets, he'd talk about politics, literature, and the rise of the philistine.

At that time I wanted to be a writer, too, although not a poet. I saw there wasn't much money in that. I wanted to be a novelist. Tom was the only published author I knew, so he seemed like a good person to talk to. I worked up the nerve to ask him to look at a manuscript I'd completed.

"I'll take a gander," he said. "Scribble a few notes."

"I'll bring it tomorrow." I wanted to ask him how quickly he'd be able to look at it, as I was young and anxious, but that seemed pushy. Instead, I decided to curry favor. "Can you read me one of your poems?"

"What kind of poetry do you like?" he asked.

In school, teachers had read "The Ancient Mariner" and "Prufrock" and "My Last Duchess" by Browning. Each had been exciting, but I had no idea how to answer him. "All kinds," I said.

He shook his head. "That's not good enough."

"But I don't know."

"That's crap. You do know. You just don't have the guts to say it. You need a definite opinion and you need to be tough enough to

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stick by it. Here's a poem for you." He took a long drag on his cigarette and then spun it away through the darkness. He breathed in, and recited, "If I could take a soft-tipped pen/And gently trace the course of your freckles/From next to next to next/Like numbered dots in a child's puzzle book/They would reveal to me/Not an image of bird in flight or wind-blown tree/But instead a richer secret/A chart to the center of love."

Then the clapping started. It was slow and sarcastic, from the darkness of the public parking lot. The woman who'd been at the corner table during Tom's first week at the Backroom walked towards us. "How lovely," she said.

"Hello, Debbie," Tom said.

"That was beautiful, Tom." She moved past us and through the back door. As she opened it, framed in the light from inside, I thought again how good-looking she was.

I was so used to Tom's perfectly timed sets that, the next night, I knew instantly something was wrong. At nine thirty-five he was still playing. At ten, too. He played all night, sometimes the same songs two or three times. He didn't mention his poetry book. He hardly talked at all.

Debbie was sitting in her usual seat. She looked at her watch as often as Tom usually checked his.

"When does he take a break?" she asked me.

"I don't know."

"Isn't he violating his contract if he doesn't?" That was unlikely. Usually Tom played so little that he owed the place a few extra tunes.

"I want to talk to the manager," she said.

When I reported this to Kevin he shook his head. "I'm busy," he said.

Around eleven Debbie slipped out. When I left after midnight, she was across the street, watching the front door, partially obscured by a lamppost.

I bought a copy of Tom's book and he signed it for me; the first signed book I ever owned. "Someday you'll know," he wrote. It wasn't warm and friendly, but it also wasn't one of those phony inscriptions you get from authors you've met for ten seconds at a bookstore signing. I still have that book, and often I open it at random and read a poem or two. I've done that so much that the binding has come loose.

I had been watching a group of girls who had come in together and had been nursing beers slowly and laughing. They'd been in the Backroom before and once one of them had smiled at me. She looked like she appreciated poetry and I wanted to see if the seductive power Tom talked about was true. I picked what seemed the ideal poem, drained my beer, and went to their table. "Hi there," I said.

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The girls seemed surprised that I'd approached them. I still think there was a sense of eager anticipation in the air. But, with all of them looking at me, I was struck dumb. So I started reading.

"In silence/From my seat behind the microphone/I watch you/As you watch/For your friend to return/And if he does not/If there is indeed a God/Is there hope/That those eyes would watch for me?"

I gave the one who'd smiled at me a wistful look, figuring she'd take the cue. Instead, they all laughed and started clapping. Other people turned to see what was going on. Then the girl I was interested in held out her hand. I was thrilled. Tom's poem had worked. I reached out towards her but, instead of grasping my fingers, she pressed twenty-five cents into my palm.

One night in mid September I was out back thinking about school. I'd just started fourth year and I was having trouble seeing the point of it. My second novel was coming along fine. I was pounding out ten pages a day on my Underwood portable. Once I got feedback from Tom, who'd need school?

A car pulled up just over the fence from me in the public lot. Framed in the headlights, I felt exposed and trapped, like a POW caught slipping under the wire. When the high beams switched on, I held my hand up to shield my eyes. "Jesus." I moved out of the light, to the driver's window.

It was a '68 Parisienne convertible, with its long hood, massive V-8, and a trunk you could use to move a living-room suite. Debbie was at the wheel.

"What are you doing?" I asked, blinking.

"Looking for Tom," she said.

"He's not here. Not this week. Not next."

I don't think she heard me. She sat staring into the pool of light.

One Saturday, Tom asked me to drive him home. He'd been storing two boxes of books in a Backroom closet and he wanted to take them. "I may want to take off again for a while," he explained.

"Back out west?"

"Maybe Newfoundland. Maybe the Yukon. I've never been and it's great country for poets."

Tom lived on the second floor of one of the old mansions along Jarvis Street. Once the homes of the local gentry, these stately buildings had been converted to restaurants or rooming houses. I parked out front. While Tom took his guitar, his harmonica case, a set of bongos, and a small amplifier out of the backseat, I opened the trunk and picked up the books.

Considering how slim the individual volumes were, two boxes of them added up. I perched the boxes on the rear bumper, bracing them with my leg, while I reached up to shut the trunk. Then I hefted the boxes again and turned toward Tom's house. He was at

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the front door and had set his guitar and the amplifier down. He was talking to Debbie, who stood to the side of the door, out of the porch light.

"I've missed you, Tom," she said.

"Then you need to work on your aim," he said, with no humor. He spread his arms, still holding the bongos and the harmonicas. "I'm a big target."

"Don't make fun, Tom. Haven't you done enough already?"

"Look, Debbie," he said, "whatever you think I did, it was a long time ago. Let's just get on with who we are and where we're going." His voice was soft, the way you talk to a child or someone who's suicidal.

"You say that, Tom, but you don't move on. What are those?" She pointed at the boxes I was holding, which were growing steadily heavier.

"Tom's book," I said, not realizing it was a rhetorical question.

"You see, Tom, you carry me with you." I was tempted to point out that I was the one doing the carrying, but let it pass. "You know you want me. That's why you took so much of me."

"Look, Debbie," Tom said, "I'm a poet. I take stuff that happens in my life and use it. It's nothing personal. I've done it with my parents, friends, other lovers."

"So raping other people's emotions is okay, as long as you do it often enough? No, Tom. You want me. You need me. Try as hard as you like, you can't give me up." She took a step forward. In the light now, I noticed her freckles. "Why else did you come home from Vancouver?"

Tom took a step back and shook his head. "Look, Debbie," he said again, but added nothing to it.

She took another step forward and this time he stood his ground. "You came back for me."

"No, Debbie. I didn't come back for you. I don't want you. Leave me alone. Please."

She looked shocked and then angry. It was interesting but I really wanted them to stop talking so I could go inside and put the boxes down. My arms were shaking from the pressure.

"You don't mean that, Tom," Debbie said. "Because if you do it means that you betrayed me. You stole from me." She pointed at the boxes I held. "You stole these from me." She swung her arm down on top of the boxes with surprising force. I tried to hold on, but my grip had already been slipping and the boxes fell to the ground, bursting open.

I almost thanked Debbie for taking the load off me. Then she picked up one of the books and slapped it sharply across Tom's face. She walked away, taking the copy with her.

I gathered up the books and Tom took his gear. "She's had a rough time," he said. "I feel sorry for her."

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In his apartment, I put the boxes on the table by the window. There was a hole in the glass, covered with clear packing tape, not yet tinged by sunlight. The hole was round, with cracks bleeding out from it—the kind of hole I remembered from childhood, when a ball would go astray.

Tom didn't play the Backroom for two months. Business stayed pretty good even though Kevin booked the odd lame act. One guy set a Panasonic tape recorder on a wooden chair. He hit play and the machine blared out tinny renditions of Tin Pan Alley tunes. The singer slouched at the microphone with his hands in his pockets and sang along. His audiences were thin and inattentive.

Other weeks were better. Ron Nigrini was there around the time that "I'm Easy" was a hit. Kevin got Spoon and the Plates back a couple of times. He experimented with a female blues singer who had some style, and a rockabilly trio that was fine until Thursday night when the bass player arrived too drunk to stand. He lay at the back of the stage hugging his bass and plucking it erratically. The next night, the place was jammed with the curious, hoping for a repeat performance.

No matter who played, Debbie did not show up. Then Kevin got the next call from Tom saying he was available. By the time Tom took the stage, she was back.

"Do me a favor, buddy," Kevin said. "Take this money to Tom?"

"Why doesn't he come get it?" I wasn't keen. My car was in the shop and Tom's apartment wasn't convenient to public transit.

"Don't know."

"It can't wait?"

Kevin knew me. "Be a good chance to ask Tom about your book," he said.

A hardware-store truck was pulling up as I reached Tom's building. Maybe they were there to fix the door lock in the lobby. It was broken, so I let myself in.

The staircase had been beautiful once, with intricately carved spindles in the railing. Several were missing now, replaced with unfinished lengths of two-by-two. Still, Tom's building was in better repair than some in the neighbourhood. The ceiling had ornate plaster flourishes and delicate corner trim and, despite a network of cracks, it was still impressive. The doors were impregnable-looking oak. They had been burnished by time and shone in a way that made me want to let the tips of my fingers linger against the wood, until I came to Tom's.

Someone had carved words into the smooth surface. The letters were large, jagged, and so deep that it must have taken a lot of strength, and a very sharp blade, to engrave them. "Thief of souls," it said. I knocked reluctantly, rapping with a single knuckle.

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"Who is it?" Tom's voice was so soft that I thought I had the wrong apartment.

"Tom?" I sounded as tentative as he did.

"Who wants to know?"

"It's me. Kevin sent your money."

The door opened a crack. Tom peered out and then opened the door slightly wider, holding out his hand.

I gave him the money. "What the hell is that?"

"A fan letter."

"You know who did it?"

He nodded as he counted.

"Who?" He didn't answer, so I tried, "When?"

"This morning." He started to shut the scarred door.

"It must have taken a long time."

"It took one hour and nine minutes," he said.

"This is Tom's last night," Kevin told me the next evening.

I was shocked. Tom had just started his second set. He seemed the same as every other night. There were ways in which he was a pain in the ass. But the people came to see him and they spent money. I wondered what had happened to get him fired so abruptly.

"Can't you let him finish the week?" I asked.

"It's not my idea," Kevin said. "He was gonna just take off, but he wanted to warn me. He said not to tell anybody. Keep it under your hat."

I was out back when Debbie pulled up. She bathed me in her headlights again, but this time shut them off right away. "Is Tom inside?" she asked.

"Not for long," I said. Kevin's news had me shaky and sad.

"What do you mean?"

"He's leaving." I hadn't meant to say it aloud. I'm still not convinced that I did. It certainly wasn't spoken any louder than a whisper, the kind you say to yourself when you're not quite able to comprehend what you think you've just heard.

Debbie stared at me, head tipped to one side. "Leaving," she said, in that same kind of whisper.

After his third set, I said to Tom, "Have you had a chance to look at my manuscript?"

He snapped his fingers, something he did with authority. "Damn, I've been meaning to give that to you." He opened his guitar case and took out a sheaf of papers held together with an elastic band. "I kinda spilled coffee on it. Sorry. And there's a little jam about page one seventy, one eighty. It has potential." He handed it to me. "There's notes here and there. Let's discuss it after the show." He started for the back door.

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I took the manuscript to the best-lighted table. His notes were surprisingly thorough. Some were effusive in their praise. Others pointed out redundancies, ugly metaphors, and places where I used too many words. His comments on plot weaknesses and clichéd scenes were lucid and clear. Nothing he said was without support and, although I didn't agree with all his remarks, I knew that if I followed his guidelines the work would be better. I was so engrossed that I didn't notice that he was late for the fourth set.

He always started on the dot of twelve. At twelve ten, I went outside to look for him. Debbie's Parisienne was still there, now backed into its spot against the fence. She was leaning against the car, smoking, and breathing heavily. The cigarettes were taking their toll. Good, I thought.

"Have you seen Tom?" I asked.

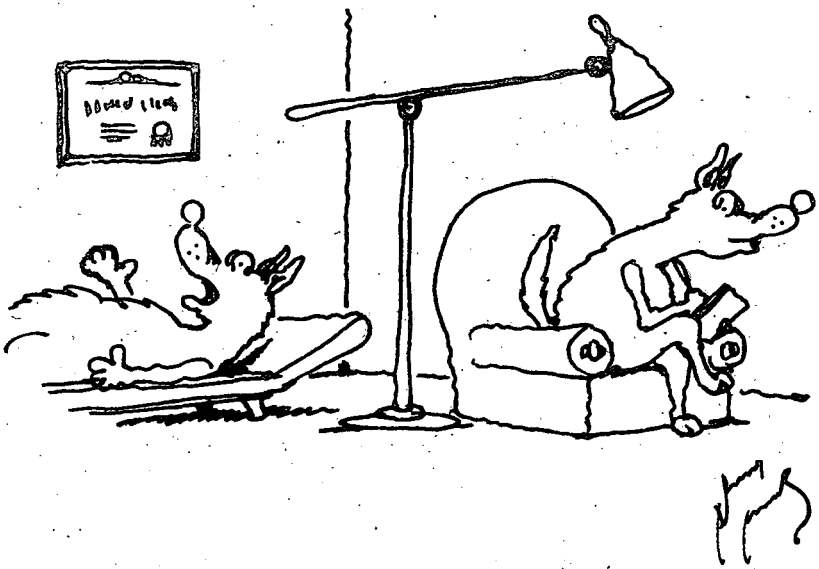
"Why?"

"I wanted to thank him."

"I'll tell him," she said, "when I see him again."

Back inside, Tom's guitar was still on the stage. I knew he wouldn't have left it behind. I went out back again. He still wasn't there, and Debbie's car was gone.

Maybe Tom had decided to quit singing for good. That didn't seem like him, though. I took the guitar home, sure that one day he'd return and want it back. I've kept it ever since. It's the least I can do. ❂



"Lately, I've been dressing up as a grandmother when I'm home alone."

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The Theft of the Blue-Ribbon Pie

by Edward D. Hoch

When Nick Velvet told Gloria he'd never attended a county fair, she couldn't believe it. "Never? In your whole life? That's like saying you've never been to a circus or ridden on a train. Everyone's been to a county fair."

They were driving across northern New Jersey, bound for the fair in Jackson County, just over the Pennsylvania line. It was a hot August afternoon with only a few wispy clouds drifting across the blue of the sky. "I don't think they have county fairs in Manhattan," he told her. "At least I never heard of any. I grew up in Greenwich Village, remember."

Nick Velvet, the most popular of Ed Hoch's series characters, has been under almost continuous option for television over the past decade. With any luck, 2006 will finally see him make his American TV debut. French TV ran a short series starring the thief of valueless things back in the '70s. How much longer must U.S. fans wait? For statistics on other Hoch characters, see this month's Jury Box. ¶

"Still—" She twisted in her seat to face him as he drove. "Didn't you have an aunt or uncle that you visited on a farm every summer? I sure did!"

"They sent me off to a boys' camp one summer and I hated it. I wouldn't go back the following year. I guess I was always a city boy."

"So here we are, heading for the Jackson County Fair. What happened?"

"Milo Marx is paying me to steal an apple pie—whichever one wins the blue ribbon at the fair tomorrow morning."

Marx was a well-known artist and collector of pop-culture artifacts who could have purchased ten thousand pies for what he was paying for this one, but Nick had stopped questioning the motives of his clients. Just one visit to Milo Marx's home—really a

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museum in the making—convinced him that a blue-ribbon pie from the Jackson County Fair was the only thing that would satisfy him. "The entire place was filled with objects," he'd told Gloria. "Books, sewing baskets, starfish, ironing boards, you name it. He finds a perfect shape or design in everyday items, or even in nature, and he collects them. He sprays the things with a plastic coating to preserve them, or entomb them, if you'd prefer. He's heard that the apple pies at the Jackson County Fair are real works of art, and he must have one for his collection. He tried to buy last year's winner and they refused to sell it to him. They said the pies only went to local people."

Nick had pointed out to Marx that he could hire a couple of kids to run in and steal the pie for a hundred bucks, far less than his fee, but the collector insisted, "It's not as easy as it seems, with a building full of people watching. Kids might drop or damage it somehow. The pie must be intact to preserve the beauty of its design."

Nick and Gloria had left early Wednesday morning, taking Route 78 across Jersey to Middletown, Pennsylvania, then turning north to Jackson County. It was a rural area at the edge of the Poconos, and they passed a few dairy farms along with the usual fields of corn and various crops Nick couldn't identify. The fair was at Clydestown, the county seat, a place of neat frame houses with a few brick buildings and churches clustered around a little park at its center. "Isn't this lovely, Nicky?" Gloria said. "I didn't know places like this still existed."

He slowed down a bit, spotting a sign with an arrow pointing toward *Jackson County Fair, August 6-13.* "This is it."

"We missed the first half of it."

"And we'll miss the end of it, too." Nick told her. "I'll pick up the winning pie in the morning and we'll be out of here."

"You sound as if you'll just walk in there and they'll hand it to you."

"Something like that."

They left the car in a massive field that had been turned into a parking lot for the week's festivities. The cars and SUVs were almost outnumbered by pickup trucks, and there were even a few horse trailers for transporting livestock. "This is real country," Nick decided, wading through the oil-stained grass and weeds already trampled half to death. They'd barely entered the Show Pavilion when they were greeted by a stout woman wearing a straw hat trimmed with daisies. "Welcome to the fair, folks! You from Scranton?"

"How'd you guess?" Nick acknowledged with a smile.

"Oh, I can tell city folks. I'm Beth Buckley, chairman of the organizing committee. If you want to see the Junior Fair Horse Show it starts in thirty minutes in the Horse Ring."

"We're more interested in the apple-pie-baking contest," Gloria

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informed her.

Nick quickly tried to explain their interest. "We have a cousin who was thinking of entering."

"Oh? Perhaps it's someone I know."

"I doubt it. She's new to the area."

"Well, you're a day early. The pie judging isn't till tomorrow morning at eleven in the Fine Arts Building. It's down this way, that building just beyond the Activities Tent."

"Thank you, Miss Buckley," Gloria said.

"It's Mrs. Buckley, but you can call me Betty. Everyone does."

"How is the pie judging done?" Nick wondered. "Do you have a panel of judges?"

"No, no! If we had a panel they'd eat up the whole pie and we couldn't auction it off. We just have one judge, our local baker, Leonard Fine. He has the Fine Bake Shop out on Union Road. Makes the most delicious pastries!"

"We'll have to give him a try," Nick promised. "How does he go about the judging?"

"It's a wonder to watch," Betty told them, obviously warming to one of her favorite topics. "He sits on stage behind a table with the apple pies lined up, maybe six or eight of them, each with a small slice taken out. He studies each one, touches the crust, tastes the slice, and makes a few notes. Sometimes he goes back to a pie for another taste. All this time he never changes his expression. And of course he doesn't know who submitted which pie. They're all numbered, and the women who baked them are seated there in front of him with their friends and family, just dying of the suspense. Finally he announces the winner and usually says a few words in praise of that pie. The woman who baked it comes forward to accept her blue ribbon."

"That's all she gets?" Gloria asked. "A blue ribbon?"

"It's a great honor, believe me."

"Do men ever enter?" Nick asked.

"We had a man win the second-place red ribbon a few years back, but he took a lot of kidding. Haven't had any men since then. That's not to say a man can't bake a good pie or cake, though. Len Fine is the best proof of that. I've heard of some county fairs that have a men's contest for pie baking, but we don't have enough men interested in it here."

"You mentioned auctioning off the winning pie."

"That's right," Betty confirmed with a nod. "Actually we auction off all the pies. There's always a husband or beau willing to bid on them. That's why the judge only eats a small slice. The pies are delivered in covered plastic containers and they're sold in the same container. The proceeds go to the 4-H Club. Of course the blue-ribbon winner always brings the highest bids. Last year it went for ninety-five dollars."

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"That much?" Gloria asked with just a touch of irony.

Betty glanced at her watch. "Look, I'm supposed to be at the swine evaluations in five minutes. You two enjoy yourselves and maybe I'll see you at the pie judging in the morning."

"Well, the people are certainly friendly here," Nick decided when she'd gone.

"This is great, Nicky! You won't have to steal the pie at all. Just bid on it and you'll get it for under a hundred dollars."

"So it would seem. But apparently Milo Marx tried that last year and they wouldn't sell it to him. Told him the pies were just for locals."

Gloria chuckled. "Maybe they add a little pot or something, like that Chicago restaurant owner you used to know."

"Can you picture that at the Jackson County Fair?"

"No, I guess not."

They drove out to the Fine Bake Shop on Union Road and found it to be a bustling little place with a tempting selection of pies, cakes, and breads. While Gloria was purchasing an angel food cake with white frosting and multicolored sparkles, Nick asked if Len Fine was around.

"He's in the back," a teenaged clerk replied. "Want me to get him?"

Presently a handsome muscular man appeared, wearing a flour-covered apron over a bright red shirt. "I'm Len Fine. What can I do for you?"

Nick produced a business card he sometimes used. "My name is Nicholas. We're doing a feature on county fairs for *Sunday Magazine,* and I understand you'll be judging the apple-pie contest in the morning."

"That's right. Do it every year. Sometimes I judge the cakes, too, but this year I'm just doing the pies."

Nick produced a notepad and pen, giving his best imitation of a journalist. "What do you consider the most important factors in judging a good apple pie?"

"First of all, the flavor of the apple must come through, and I always give high marks to appearance as well. The pie crust is important. I look for a crust that's a bit flaky without falling apart. There's a woman here in town, last year's blue-ribbon winner, who has a near perfect crust recipe using egg and vinegar. I always know her pies. And her designs, occasionally with an intricate latticework covering, are the best I've ever seen. She may repeat her win again this year."

"I'd be interested in interviewing her," Nick told him. "Could you give me her name?"

"Sure, it's Maggie Oates. She lives just a few blocks from here, and I know she'd love to see her name in the papers. I can call her if you'd like."

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"That would be helpful, especially if she ends up winning again."

They parked in front of a two-story house with light green siding and a wide front porch. Maggie Oates was a pleasant, attractive woman in her thirties who greeted them at the door with a broad smile. "You're the magazine folks Len phoned me about?"

"That's right," Nick said, offering his card. "This is Gloria, my photographer." On cue, Gloria produced her impressive-looking digital camera.

"Come right in! My husband's still at work but he'll be home soon." She led the way into the kitchen, a room that seemed to dominate the first floor of their modest house. Several pie tins were deployed along the countertop, and a finished pie cut into six pieces already had two pieces missing. "You'll have to excuse the mess. It's always like this at county-fair time. I like to work alone and ignore the clutter."

"Is this your entry?" Nick asked, eyeing the partly eaten pie.

"That's a test run. The final product is in the oven now. They taste the same, but my official entry has a fancier top crust. Want a piece?"

"Sure," Gloria answered before Nick could decline.

Maggie Oates glanced at the cluttered kitchen table. "Let's go in the dining room. It's pleasanter there."

She brought the remains of the pie along with some plates and forks. The dining room, like the rest of the downstairs, had a neat but lived-in look about it. She quickly doled out a piece of pie for each of them and took another for herself. "This is my third one," she admitted. "I like my own baking."

"It's delicious," Gloria decided after her first bite, and Nick had to admit it was tasty.

"I make grape pies during the fall harvest and sell them from here," Maggie told them. "I do a nice little business, and that pleases Wayne." A car pulled into the driveway. "That'll be him now."

Maggie's husband was the sort who'd probably been a star athlete in high school before he acquired a pot belly and receding hairline. He seemed to like sharing in his wife's sudden fame, and Nick hoped he wouldn't be disappointed when the picture of the two of them that Gloria snapped never got published anywhere. A chime on the stove told Maggie that her apple pie was ready and she hurried to remove it from the oven. "I'll let it cool a bit and then put it in its container for the judging."

Nick and Gloria joined Wayne in admiring the finished product. There was none of the latticework Nick had expected. The top crust was solid, but an artistic outline of an apple had been cleverly formed by air holes. "Where did you learn to bake like this?" Gloria marveled.

"From my mother, of course. Isn't that how all girls learn? Fran Oliver made the best cakes and pies in the county. Good as I am, I

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could never beat her. She won four blue ribbons at the fair and so far I only have one."

"You'll get there," Wayne promised, squeezing her shoulder.

"I don't know. Jenny Wadsworth was tough competition last year, and I'm sure she'll have a pie in tomorrow's contest."

"Jackson County pies seem to attract attention," Nick remarked as they returned to the dining room. "We heard a report that some art collector even tried to buy one last year to add to his collection."

"That fellow Marx!" Wayne Oates said with a snort. "He was offering thousands of dollars for the prize-winning pie but Beth Buckley wouldn't let him buy it. She got the county-fair commission to rule that only county residents could bid during the auction. She said the pies were for eating, not for display in a museum, and I suppose she had a point. He even asked Maggie to bake an identical pie for his collection but she refused."

"I was tempted," Maggie admitted. "He offered a great deal of money. But by that time the county was really up in arms. It had become a matter of civic pride that the winning pie stay here."

"Speaking of pie, did you save a piece for me?" Wayne asked.

"Right here!"

"I'll just get a knife from the kitchen," he said, but when he returned with it he realized he didn't need it. "There's only one piece left. I can handle that."

When the test pie had been consumed to everyone's satisfaction, Maggie returned to the kitchen and placed the contest entry in a clear plastic container, sealing it with tape and adding a removable tag with her name, ready for delivery.

"What happens now?" Nick asked.

"I'll give it to Beth at ten tomorrow morning and she'll assign a number to it. Then it goes on the table for the judging."

"How long does that take?"

"It depends on how many pies are entered. Betty cuts a thin slice out of each one and places it on a paper plate."

"For Leonard Fine," Wayne supplied. "He's the judge."

Nick smiled at him. "It would be a thrill to see your wife win another blue ribbon. Will you be there?"

He shook his head. "I work security at the county hospital and we're short-handed. I have to be on duty. If Maggie wins, take lots of pictures."

"We'll do that," Nick promised as they were leaving.

They found a room at a motel outside of town. Over dinner Gloria said, "You could have stolen the pie from her kitchen and we'd be on our way home now."

Nick shook his head. "You're forgetting it has to be the blue-ribbon winner. I have to wait for the judging. Just because she

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won last year doesn't mean she'll win again."

"How are you going to steal it?"

"You'll see."

But things rarely went as smoothly as Nick planned. Returning to their motel room, they found a middle-aged woman in a sweatshirt and jeans waiting for them. "Are you Mr. Nicholas, the journalist?" she asked.

"I am. How can I help you?"

"My name is Rita Wadsworth. Maggie told me you're doing a story on her pies and I want to make sure you include me. I'm going to win the blue ribbon this year."

"Is that so?" Nick took out his key card for the door. "Please come in. We'll certainly want to get your name in the story."

Inside the cramped motel room the woman glanced at the queen-size bed as if wondering whether they both slept in it. "Now tell us about yourself," Nick suggested. "Have you always lived in Clydestown?"

She sat uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa, clutching a large manila envelope. "Born and raised here. My husband and two sons work our dairy farm out on the Post Road. Maggie Oates and I have been rivals for years in the apple-pie judging. I won two years ago and she won last year. I'm out to reclaim the championship this time. When I phoned her tonight and she said you'd interviewed her, I checked the motels until I found where you were."

"That was clever of you," Gloria offered.

"I've got pictures of my prize-winning pie from two years ago if you'd like to see them." She unclasped the envelope and slid out some color photos.

"Very nice," Nick commented, passing them on to Gloria.

"The judging here has always stressed the appearance of the pie as much as its taste." She added, "Sometimes I think the appearance of the baker counts, too, at least with Leonard Fine."

"Isn't it a blind judging?"

"Yes, but everyone recognizes Maggie's special crust flavor. I try to be clever with my crust design, but she still beat me out last year."

"You don't approve of Fine's judging?"

She shrugged. "The women all love him. We all wish we had a husband who could bake like he does."

"If he picks your pie, be assured you'll be seeing more of us."

"You may keep the pictures for your story if you wish."

Nick hesitated. "Let me just keep one and you take the rest."

"Will you be at the judging in the morning?"

"I certainly will," he assured her. "Good luck."

The next morning they finished breakfast, picked up a New York

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paper, and drove out to the fairgrounds, arriving before ten so they could witness the delivery of the pies. Beth Buckley had positioned herself at the entrance to the Fine Arts Building, accepting apple pies in their plastic containers. "Hello there," she greeted them. "I hear you've been getting around our town, talking to our baker and some of the ladies."

"They're talented people," Nick assured her. "Gloria bought one of Fine's angel food cakes and we had some last night."

Already there were three apple pies in front of Beth Buckley and as they chatted Maggie Oates arrived with hers. Beth used a marking pen to write a number on the nametag and the same number on the plastic container. Then she removed Maggie's tag and placed it with the others in a cigar box. "All set," she told the young woman. "Good luck!"

"How many entries are there?" Maggie asked.

"Yours is number four, and I know we'll be getting one from Rita Wadsworth."

"Here she comes now," Gloria observed, seeing her approach from the parking lot.

"That makes five," Beth said as she accepted Rita's pie. "Good luck to you both."

"Come on, Maggie," Rita urged. "We might as well sit together and show everyone we're friends."

Maggie followed her inside with some reluctance and Beth commented, "They're not really friends at all, not during the fair. Last time they had a big argument about the merits of single-crust pie versus double-crust."

Nick and Gloria strolled around a bit, watching children on the Ferris wheel and teenagers caring for their animals. One girl was leading a llama toward the Livestock Building and Gloria commented, "In my day we had pigs and goats."

"Times change even on the farm."

"Some things don't change. They still have milking contests."

They were back in time for the judging, just as Beth Buckley was up on stage slicing a slender piece from each pie and placing it on a paper plate. The pies themselves were in their original containers, opened so the judge could study their design. The spectators and contestants themselves were at the foot of the low stage, straining for a look at the entries and trying to guess who'd submitted each pie. There were still only five in the line, and when Nick asked Beth about it she shrugged. "I guess Rita and Maggie are strong contenders. They frightened most of the others away. But we've still got some great-looking pies."

"Good enough to eat," Gloria agreed.

They found seats in the third row as Leonard Fine entered and mounted the platform. He carried a black ledger in one hand, perhaps to record the results of his judging, and he'd exchanged his

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red shirt for a more dressy black one with gold braid on the sleeves. "Good morning, folks," he greeted them. "It's nice to see so much interest in the apple-pie judging, and I hope you'll keep up that interest at auction time. Those of you who've attended my previous judging know that I give high marks for both taste and appearance. I understand we have two prior blue-ribbon winners among this year's entrants, so my taste buds are really looking forward to this."

The baker sat down behind the table and pulled all five slices of pie a bit closer. Starting at his left he cut a small piece with his fork and tasted it. The process was repeated with the next four. He seemed to enjoy every bite, but tried to keep his face impassive. Twice he went back for a second helping and the contestants in the front row seemed to hold their collective breaths.

Then, without warning, Len Fine's expression changed. It was as if he'd suddenly bitten into a hive of bees. He opened his mouth and reached for a glass of water Beth had left on the table. Gulping it down, he seemed to recover for an instant. "The blue ribbon goes to pie number four," he said clearly, then was seized by a fit of coughing. He slipped out of his chair and hit the floor.

Beth and a couple of others ran to the stage while the rest of the audience rose uncertainly to its feet. "Did you do that, Nicky?" Gloria whispered.

"Of course not! I think he's been poisoned."

Len Fine was dead by the time the ambulance crew arrived. Two women had fainted and the Fine Arts Building was in an uproar. Beth Buckley was on the platform trying to calm everyone down but it was a losing battle. Nick hurried to her side, speaking in a loud voice, and asked everyone to file out quietly. It seemed clear to him that Fine had been poisoned by one of the apple pies and he had a motive for lending Beth a hand with the crowd. It gave him an opportunity to slip the baker's journal into the folds of the newspaper he carried. At that moment he didn't know himself why he wanted it.

Once outside, Gloria asked, "Where does that leave us?"

"He lived long enough to name pie number four as the winner. That was Maggie Oates's number."

"Yes, but surely the police will take all five pies as evidence. You'll never get your hands on any of them."

They remained on the scene while the body was removed and the county sheriff questioned Mrs. Buckley and the spectators who'd been closest to the stage. All agreed that Fine seemed in perfect health when he entered the building and spoke to them. It wasn't until he tasted the pies that he seemed to become ill.

The sheriff, a man named Pike with a bushy red moustache, asked Beth if Fine had eaten anything else. "Not a thing," she

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replied, but was immediately corrected by Ruth Wadsworth.

"He drank some of the water," she reminded them.

Sheriff Pike glanced at the half-empty glass and motioned to a deputy. "We'd better take that, too."

When the building was finally cleared, Nick and Gloria headed back to their car. He produced Fine's journal from the folds of his newspaper. "What's that?" Gloria asked.

"He had this with him. I thought it might have information about the pie judging, but it appears to be mostly an appointment book with the fair dates and his personal schedule."

"That won't tell us anything."

"No . . ." He hesitated and flipped through several of the pages. "I wonder what this is. Every week or ten days there's a notation *Moo.*"

"Maybe he has a thing about cows."

"Or dairy farms," Nick suggested, remembering Rita Wadsworth's farm.

They drove back to the motel while Nick tried to decide his next move. Gloria was certainly correct that Maggie's prize-winning pie was beyond his reach, and by the time the police finished their tests it wouldn't look like anything Milo Marx would want to preserve in plastic. Somehow he had to convince Maggie to bake a duplicate pie without mentioning Marx's name.

Later that afternoon they returned to the Oates home. Maggie had called Wayne at work with the news of Fine's death and he'd come home early to comfort her. "She's pretty broken up," he told them at the door. "I don't think she wants visitors."

Maggie heard them talking and put in an appearance. "It's a terrible tragedy, what happened to Len. He was such a fine man. I gave a statement to the police about my pie, but there's no way it could have been poisoned."

"If he was poisoned I'm sure it came from elsewhere," Nick said.

But even as he uttered those reassuring words the sheriff's car pulled up in front of the house with a state police car right behind it. Sheriff Pike came onto the porch and spoke the dire words. "Sorry to bother you again, Maggie, but we're going to have to take you in for further questioning. The preliminary lab report indicates the poison was in your pie, though they haven't determined the source of it yet."

"That's impossible! I didn't poison Len, and I was alone here when I baked it. After it cooled I sealed it in its plastic box. It wasn't opened till Beth cut the slices for judging this morning, and she did that before a roomful of people."

The sheriff tried to calm her. "No one's saying it was deliberate, Maggie. Maybe some drain cleaner accidentally spilled into your filling."

"No!" she insisted. "No, no, no! Why would I kill him when he

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gave me the blue ribbon last year and again this year?"

"You didn't know you'd be winning again," the sheriff pointed out. "Maybe you thought he'd give the ribbon to Rita."

Wayne Oates tried to intervene. "If Maggie leaves this house, I'm going with her. You'll have to lock me up, too."

"The state cops just have some more questions, Maggie. You'll have to come along."

Nick watched them lead her away, with Wayne following behind. "There goes your chance of getting another pie," Gloria said.

The following morning it was announced that Maggie Oates was being held without bail and the case would be referred to the grand jury for possible indictment. Nick was finished in Clydestown. He had failed an assignment for the first time in his career. The prize pie was being dissected in a police lab and the only person who might duplicate it was behind bars. Nick and Gloria checked out of their motel and headed home.

"You shouldn't feel bad," Gloria said, trying to comfort him. "There was nothing you could do."

As they headed out of town he could see the top of the Ferris wheel and the tents for the fair. A truck came out of the road ahead with two prize cows in the back, their blue ribbons proudly displayed. "Cows, Nicky. Moo!"

"Are you trying to cheer me up?"

"I was reminding you of the notes in the baker's appointment book. Remember?"

"I remember," Nick replied after just a moment's silence. He made a quick U-turn on the nearly deserted road. "We're going back."

"Back where?"

"To the sheriff's office."

They arrived within minutes and he parked behind the sheriff's car. "What are you trying to do?" she asked.

"Deliver the winning pie to Milo Marx. And the only way I can do it is by getting Maggie Oates out of jail."

"You're not planning a jail break!"

"No, I'm planning to convince them that she didn't poison Len Fine."

They found Beth Buckley and Rita Wadsworth in the waiting room. "The sheriff and county prosecutor are taking statements from everyone," Beth explained. "They've got Maggie's husband in there now."

Nick strode forward and knocked on the door. An angry Sheriff Pike opened it. "We're not to be disturbed. What are you doing here, Nicholas?"

"I have important information regarding Leonard Fine's death, Sheriff."

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"Just wait out there till we're finished with Mr. Oates."

"It can't wait," Nick said, forcing his way into the room. The county prosecutor half rose from his chair, looking startled, and Wayne Oates merely seemed puzzled.

Nick dropped Leonard Fine's journal on the sheriff's desk. "I accidentally picked this up along with my papers after Fine's collapse. When I realized what it was, I had to return it right away."

"Accidentally," the prosecutor repeated, but Nick ignored him.

He flipped open the book to the daily appointments section and pointed to the series of *MOO* notations. "Do you have any notion as to what these mean?" he asked, holding the book for Wayne Oates to see.

"Not the slightest."

"That's odd, since they're your wife's initials. She happened to mention that her mother's name was Oliver. She's Maggie Oliver Oates."

The sheriff and the prosecutor were both out of their chairs, crowding around for a look at the book. "What's this mean, Wayne?" Sheriff Pike asked.

"I don't know."

But Nick had an explanation. "It means that Len Fine and your wife were meeting regularly, every week or ten days. Can you think of any reason for those meetings?"

Wayne Oates moistened his lips. "No."

"Since you had no knowledge of these meetings, is it safe to say they were clandestine in nature?"

That brought Wayne out of his chair, too. "Listen, if you're implying my wife and Fine were lovers, you're—"

"That's exactly what I'm implying. And somehow you found out about it."

Sheriff Pike stepped between them. "Let's everyone calm down and be seated. If Maggie and Len were having a secret relationship, maybe he broke it off. Maybe that's why she poisoned him."

"Would she have poisoned her own pie, Sheriff, knowing it would make her the number-one suspect? And would Fine have used his dying breath to declare her the winner if they'd broken off their relationship?"

Sheriff Pike was shaking his head. "Then you tell me, Mr. Nicholas, who else could possibly have poisoned that pie? The testimony shows that Maggie was alone when she baked it, and sealed it in a box as soon as it was cool. She delivered it to Beth Buckley at the fair. Beth opened the pies and cut slices for judging in full view of the spectators. There was no chance for her or anyone else to have poisoned it."

"You're forgetting the matter of motive," Nick said. "If Maggie and Fine were having an affair, there's one other person with a motive for killing him—and who wouldn't be too upset if Maggie

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got blamed for it."

"Look here!" Wayne said, out of his chair again. "I didn't kill anybody! There's no way I could have poisoned that pie."

"Ah, but there is," Nick told them. "While the pie was cooling in the kitchen you went out there to get a knife to cut yourself a piece of the test pie, even though there was only one piece left. While you were out there with the pie it was a simple matter to poison it."

"How?" Wayne demanded. "Tell me how! The pie was already baked, with its crust intact."

"By injecting the poison into the pie with a hypodermic needle, through the air holes in the top crust. You're a security guard at the hospital, with plenty of opportunity to obtain both the poison and the needles."

That was the beginning of the end. By day's end, Wayne Oates had made a full confession and Maggie had been freed. Nick and Gloria waited for her and drove her home. "I can't thank you enough," she told them. "You've saved my life. And Beth is awarding me the blue ribbon, even though Wayne poisoned my pie. If there's anything I can do to repay you—"

"There is one thing," Nick told her with a smile. "You could bake us one of those prize-winning pies." ⊛

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

DeKok and the Death of a Rottweiler

by Baantjer

Translated from the Dutch by H.G. Smittenaar.

Inspector DeKok of the renowned old police station at Warmoes Street in Amsterdam looked with surprise at the stately man who sat down on the chair next to his desk in the crowded detective room.

"Schouten," he exclaimed happily, "Jan Schouten."

The man crossed his long legs and nodded slowly. "You still have a good memory for faces," he observed.

DeKok smiled. "And for names," he answered. "A useful professional talent."

The inspector surveyed his visitor attentively. His sharp glance roamed from the willful chin to the clear blue eyes.

"You're still looking good," he said with an admiring tone in his voice. The gray sleuth shook his head. "Jan Schouten," he repeated with a sigh. "I had no idea you were still around."

The visitor grinned. With widespread fingers he combed through his silver hair, which reached almost to his shoulders.

"I always check the obituaries first," he said with a shrug. "If I don't see my name, I'm ready to start another day with gusto."

The most popular author in the Netherlands, Baantjer has more than fifty novels in print featuring his series detective Inspector DeKok. A former inspector for the Amsterdam police himself, the author seems to spin many of his tales from commonplace events—if murder can ever be called such. The latest Baantjer title available in English is *DeKok and Variations on Murder,* which will be re-released in paperback in June 2006 by Speck Press.

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DeKok looked at him, listened to the tone of voice, but did not react. Instead he pointed to the desk next to him.

"Do you know Dick Vledder . . . the great Dutch hope of the Municipal Police Department . . . he's been my partner for ages."

Schouten frowned in thought.

"Was he here when I left?"

DeKok shook his head.

"No, he came shortly after you resigned." DeKok tilted his head and looked at Schouten with a question in his eyes. "How do you like being a private eye?"

"I serve whoever hires me."

"Do you also serve Justice?" asked DeKok with a grin.

"Well," sighed Jan Schouten, "as an ex-cop it takes some getting used to the fact that the interests of your client take precedence."

"Precedence over what?"

"Over what you are pleased to call Justice."

DeKok, with his maddening ability to ignore anything he did not want to pursue, looked over Schouten's head into the distance. He pointed a finger at the clock over the entrance to the room.

"It's a quarter past eleven," he said harshly. "Our shift was over at eleven." He gave his ex-colleague a closed look. "What is it you want?"

"Clayberg is afraid."

"And who is Clayberg?"

"President of Clayberg and Bosch. Since his life has been threatened, he distrusts everyone . . . even me. He wants you to investigate the matter."

"Where does he live?"

"South Walkway . . . a large house."

DeKok shook his head.

"That's out of our jurisdiction. It doesn't fall under Warmoes Street. That's the . . . eh . . ."

"Fourteenth Precinct," supplied Vledder.

"Right," agreed DeKok, "Leyden Street, Fourteenth Precinct."

Schouten sighed.

"I know that. And I told him so." His voice changed. "Do it for me," he pleaded. "I don't particularly like Clayberg. He's a man without scruples. But he pays well and I cannot afford to lose a client."

DeKok looked at his former colleague with a smile.

"All right, until what time can he receive us?"

Vledder, as usual, manoeuvred the police car through the busy streets. DeKok seldom drove. By his own admission he was the worst driver in the Netherlands, maybe all of Europe. And he was not about to drive in the snow under any circumstances. The flakes came down thick and fast. The wipers could hardly keep an

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opening for Vledder to peer through. From Amstel Dike they approached South Walkway. The snow became heavier. The young inspector slowed down even more . . . leaned close to the windshield. South Walkway looked deserted.

Suddenly Vledder pointed and took his foot off the gas pedal. On the side of the road the blue lights of an ambulance rotated. Closeby were the red and blue lights of a police car. Faint tracks in the snow showed that the ambulance had stopped suddenly and then slid to the side of the road.

Vledder allowed the car to creep forward and parked behind the ambulance. There was nobody in sight. The two inspectors stepped out of the car and approached two blanket-covered bodies.

It was strangely silent. The snow seemed to absorb all sound. DeKok leaned forward and lifted the corner of the closest blanket.

He found a dead dog, stretched out and with a long tongue half out of its mouth. It was a Rottweiler. The beautiful black coat had been perforated by several bullet holes. Blood still seeped from the wounds.

The old inspector kneeled down next to the dog and looked at its mouth. Shreds of cloth were stuck between the fearsome teeth. DeKok covered the dog up again and walked to the second blanket. A young uniformed constable came running from the direction of the police car.

"What are you doing?" he called out. "Who do you think you are?"

DeKok ignored the constable.

Carefully he pulled the blanket away. A dead man lay supine in the snow. DeKok estimated his age to be around sixty. He had a round, full face and a dark, receding hairline. The legs were slightly spread and the feet were almost perpendicular to the ground. The dark-blue overcoat and the plaid jacket were open. On the white shirt there was a horizontal line of bloody spots where bullets had impacted. Snow melted on the dead face.

Panting, the constable reached him.

"I asked you a question," he said in a severe tone of voice.

DeKok ignored the remark and pointed at the dead man.

"Do you know him?"

The constable nodded slowly.

"Mr. Clayberg . . . President of Clayberg and Bosch. He lives nearby."

DeKok pointed at the other blanket.

"And the dog?"

"It's his dog."

"Make sure that the dog is also transported to the lab."

"The dog?"

"Yes, I want an autopsy on the dog as well."

Suddenly the young constable recognized DeKok.

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"You're Inspector DeKok," he said.

Vledder rolled his eyes and watched DeKok.

"Who found them?" asked DeKok.

"Mrs. Clayberg. She heard the shots and came out to investigate."

"You were first on the scene?"

"Yes."

"And you covered them?"

"Yes, I couldn't just leave them lying in the snow like that."

"Where's the ambulance driver?"

"Calling for instructions. He's not sure he can transport dead bodies."

"Quite right. Wait for the coroner and the van from the morgue."

The young constable saluted.

"Now show me the house. I want to talk to Mrs. Clayberg."

DeKok estimated the woman to be about ten years younger than her late husband. She was seated in an imposing chair upholstered in red velour and fringed with gold thread. She looked upset, small and fragile. Her makeup was streaked and the too-dark dyed hair hung down in disorderly streams.

DeKok leaned forward.

"My condolences for the loss of your husband," he said formally. "It must have been a great shock to you."

Mrs. Clayberg attempted a half-smile, but did not succeed.

"I knew something was bound to happen," she said softly. She raised her head and with a tired gesture removed some hair from in front of her eyes. "May I ask who you are?"

DeKok hesitated for a moment.

"DeKok," he said after a slight pause. "DeKok—spelled kay-oh-kay." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "This is my colleague, Vledder. We're inspectors, attached to Warmoes Street station." He paused. Then he continued in a businesslike manner: "Your husband let the dog out at the same time every evening?"

Mrs. Clayberg nodded.

"Amber," she said sadly, "had a kind of clock inside. Every evening at the same time she let us know she wanted to go outside."

"Tonight also?"

"Exactly."

"What time was that?"

"Half-past eleven . . . always."

DeKok rubbed his chin.

"Do you get along with your neighbors?"

Mrs. Clayberg made an uncertain gesture.

"We have a large garden around the house . . . almost a park. It

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is Karl's pride and joy. Karl is our gardener. He's rather depressed lately. Not his normal self."

"And why is that?"

"My husband has recently sold a big parcel of land to a developer. He wants to put up a number of houses. Large houses, like this, but much closer together. The neighbors are not too happy about it. They're afraid the rural character of the area will be destroyed. Zundert, our neighbor on the right, has even threatened to kill my husband if the plans go through."

"Did your husband take the threat seriously?"

"Certainly."

DeKok bent his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Awhile ago," he said, "you mentioned that you knew something was about to happen. Did you have reason to assume that . . . that your husband would be the victim of a crime?"

The woman closed her eyes and sighed deeply.

"I knew it."

"Intuition?"

Mrs. Clayberg shook her head.

" 'Someday I'll have you shot like an animal,' " she said tonelessly.

"Who said that?"

"Gerard . . . Gerard Bosch, his partner."

When, around noon, DeKok entered the detective room, he was greeted by Vledder, who was leaning back in his chair, a broad smile on his face.

"This time it's my turn to ask you how the autopsy went. Usually you leave that nasty job for me."

DeKok aimed his decrepit old hat at the peg in the wall and missed, as usual. With his raincoat still on, he sat down behind his desk.

"I am well content. The good doctor looked a bit strange when I put the dead dog on the table, but I was soon able to convince him."

"And?"

A secretive smile played around DeKok's lips.

"There are professions where it's difficult to keep your nails clean," he said mysteriously.

Vledder looked nonplussed.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

DeKok merely pointed at the telephone.

"Call Mrs. Clayberg and ask if the gardener has had an accident."

"Why?"

"Just do as I ask," said DeKok, irritation in his voice. He stood up and walked over to where his hat had hit the floor. He bent

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over and picked it up. Meanwhile he listened to Vledder's end of the conversation.

After a few minutes the young inspector looked up at DeKok with a surprised look on his face.

"Karl Nelis, the gardener, has called in sick. He caught his hand in a mower."

DeKok turned around and prepared to leave the room. Just before he got to the door, he turned around to look at Vledder, who had followed him.

"In winter?"

In the River Quarter, so called because all the streets are named after rivers, they found a place for the car in Maas Street. They exited the car and DeKok looked around. It was a street of brownstone houses, rebuilt as apartments, one family per floor.

"This is where he lives?"

Vledder nodded; he always had all those kinds of details ready.

"Number 812. A little farther down . . . third floor."

With difficulty DeKok pressed his two hundred pounds up the narrow wooden staircase. Vledder followed easily.

On the third floor the gray-haired sleuth knocked on a door.

A few seconds later the door was opened by a compact man with a weathered face. His left arm was in a sling.

Politely DeKok lifted his head.

"You're Karl Nelis?"

"Yes."

"My name is DeKok . . . with a kay-oh-kay." He pointed at Vledder. "My colleague, Vledder. We're police inspectors and we would like to talk to you."

The man opened the door wider and led the way to the living room. He made an inviting gesture to a number of straight chairs around a square table near the window.

DeKok placed his decrepit little hat on the floor and took a seat.

Karl Nelis sat down at the opposite side of the table and with his free hand wiped away some invisible fluff from the woolen tablecloth. DeKok looked at him with a stony face.

"I arrest you for the murder of Mr. Clayberg," DeKok said calmly. He reached into a side pocket and produced a cellophane envelope. The evidence bag was sealed with the coat of arms of the City of Amsterdam. DeKok slid the bag across the tablecloth in front of the gardener.

Nelis looked at it.

A stray sunbeam broke through the window and caressed the bloody ends of an index finger and a middle finger.

DeKok made an apologetic gesture.

"Our pathologist found your fingers this morning in the throat of the Rottweiler." ●

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SISTERS AND LOVERS

by Natasha Cooper

The flight attendant offered me food. I shook my head. Even if I hadn't felt sick, I wouldn't have fancied reconstituted chicken. I'd been dining on lamb cooked with pomegranate juice and pistachio nuts for the past week. She moved on, leaving me to stare out of the window.

All I could think about was what I was going to say to Sally. The breakup had half killed her in itself. How would she bear the whole truth? Some people thought she was tougher than she let on, but I knew better.

When she phoned that night, her voice full of panic, I'd gone at once. I always did. Friends said I'd spoiled her, but how could I help it? She was only twelve when Mum died, and I was sixteen. I'll never forget the way she shook and clung to me then. I *had* to look after her.

Her eyes were puffy with crying, and Geoff's letter was crumpled in her hands.

"So you see, Sally," he had written in the last paragraph, *"I'm off to make a new start in North Cyprus. You'll hate me for a bit, but in the end you'll see it'd be worse if I stayed and lied to you."*

"He wasn't answering any of his phones yesterday," she said, crying again. "But I never thought . . . How could he, Kate?"

"I don't know, Sally. Sometimes when we think we know someone . . ." I didn't know what to say so I brushed her fine blond hair away from her swollen eyes and tried again. "You never like seeing the truth about people you love, but sometimes you have to. You hated me for telling you to be careful about those investments of his. Maybe I was right and he wasn't the trustworthy man you wanted him to be."

Natasha Cooper has lived all of her life in London, so it's no surprise that she sets her novels there. In the U.S., her books are published by St. Martin's Press, and they have also been translated for sale in several other countries. Ms. Cooper's most recent novel, *Gagged and Bound*, has been named one of the best paperbacks of 2006 by *Publishing News*, which says, "Strong characterization and sense of place put Natasha Cooper among the best in current crime writing." †

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"He was once." She grabbed my wrist. Her palm felt damp, but her grip was strong as ever. "You could bring him back, if you went out there and talked to him. I *need* him, Kate. Promise you'll go. Please?"

What could I say? I couldn't tell her that I was glad Geoff was gone, that I really hadn't liked him; she looked so fragile and so trusting, I did as any loyal sister would. I promised to try.

In fact it wasn't hard to find him. North Cyprus is a small place. I booked a hotel room in Kyrenia. They call it Girne now. It's a harbour with yachts and restaurants round the edge. The first night I went to a bar and met some expats. They knew nearly every English person on the island, so it was easy to ask about Geoff.

They hadn't met him, but they said they could find out if anyone new had rented a house or flat. It only took four phone calls before they came up with the address.

First thing next morning, I hired a car and drove to where he was renting a villa. There was no one about, but the doors were unlocked, so I knew he couldn't be far. I called his name, then stood on the terrace, looking round. It was so beautiful. All I could see ahead of me was sea; nothing but sea between me and Turkey.

It was only a minute or two before Geoff emerged from the house in his dressing gown, holding a mug that smelled of coffee.

"I never thought she'd send you," he said, grinning. "What are you supposed to do? Drag me back to England by my ear?"

"Maybe," I said. "Or at least try to talk some sense into you. What are you thinking of to throw away everything you and Sally have together?"

"You're out of date," he said, putting down the empty mug. "I've been a bit of a naughty boy, as your sister will discover when the Fraud Squad comes looking for me." He grinned again. "But there's no extradition treaty with North Cyprus, so they won't get me, or the dosh, darling."

How was I going to tell her? My head was aching, so I laid it against the cold window. I'd done a bit of digging and now I knew he'd used her name and her money in a share scam. Sally was going to be in a lot of trouble, as well as deeply in debt.

The captain announced our descent. For the first time I was glad when we were held in a queue, then that my case took ages to appear on the carousel. Eventually I pulled it through the Nothing to Declare channel.

There she was, waiting as she'd promised. She looked better. Maybe she wouldn't crack under the news. I put my arms around her.

"Where is he?"

"I couldn't make him come. But it's worse than that, Sally. He—"

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I was saved by the buzz of her phone. She pushed me away.

"Yes," she said into the phone, suddenly crisp. "No, she didn't manage it. D'you want me to come in now or shall we talk in the morning?"

I must have moved or flinched because she broke off, looking at me. There was a kind of power in her I'd never seen, and a bit of shame. She switched off the phone.

"Don't look like that, Katie," she said, wheedling again. "I didn't do it to hurt you. It's work. There are things I have to keep secret."

"You mean, you *knew* what Geoff was up to?"

"We suspected, but we needed proof. I was collecting evidence."

"Why didn't you tell me?" A new feeling was growing in me. I hated it.

Sally shrugged. "He could've been telling the truth for once. We thought it worth sending you, but you had to believe the story or you'd have screwed up. You never could tell lies and I couldn't let you jeopardise this."

I stood back. My sister met my gaze and I felt as if I was seeing her for the first time. "I know you must feel used, Kate, but . . ."

I blanked the rest of what she said. How could she trick me like this?

Sometimes, when we think we know someone . . . ●

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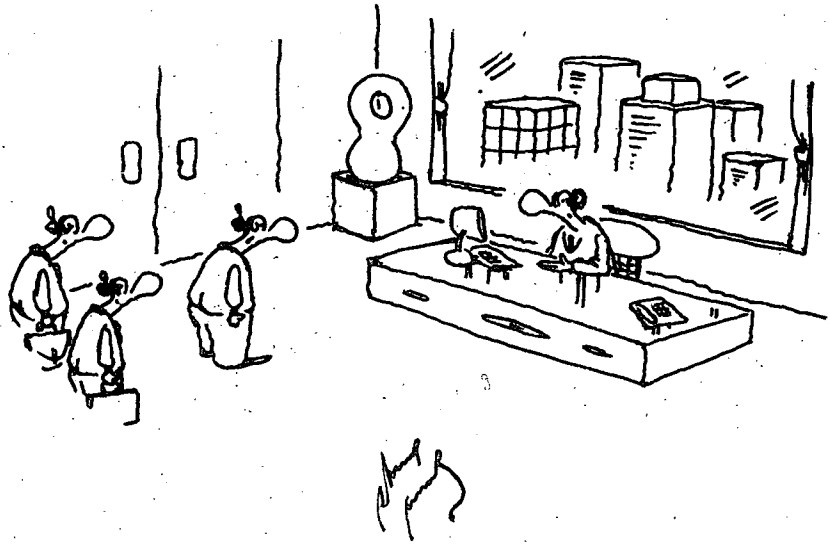

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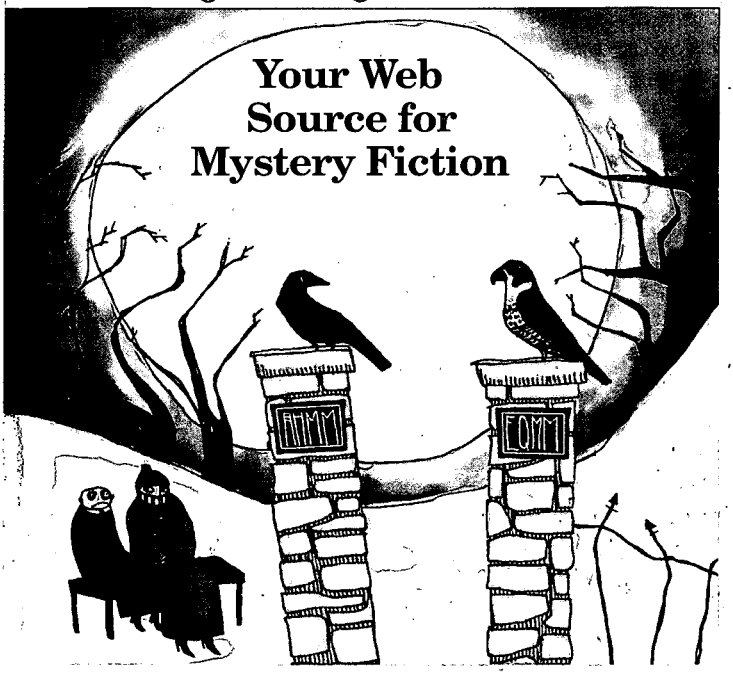

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